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Revolutionaries in Form: the Russian Futurist Poets in the Cultural Politics of the Early Soviet Union, 1917-1928

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Revolutionaries in Form: the Russian Futurist Poets in the Cultural Politics
of the Early Soviet Union, 1917-1928

Senior Project Submitted to
The Russian and Eurasian Studies Department and Political Studies Department
of Bard College

by
Noah Wurtz

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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This thesis is dedicated to Cary Hughes

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Introduction

Revolution's days have yet to be sung
by the thousand-page book of time.
Into the streets, the crowds among,
futurists,
drummers,
masters of rhyme !

-Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Order of the Day to the Army of the Arts"

On December 19th, 1913, intrigued members of the Russian intelligentsia and cultural elite gathered in the Luna Theatre in St. Petersburg for an evening of bizarre, and shocking spectacle. The producers of the evening's performances, the Cubo-Futurists, were widely known at the time for inciting the public with their experimental verse, and for declaring themselves to be in open opposition to what they saw as the stale and sanctimonious style of the Russian cultural elite. A distinct feeling of revolt, if not outright revolution, electrified the air. That evening's performances, Alexei Kruchenykh's Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun* (1913), and Vladimir Mayakovsky's play *Vladimir Mayakovsky: a Tragedy*, were, in the eyes of the Cubo-Futurists, a resounding success; they were greeted with a mix of "boos, whistles, cheers, howls, and applause."¹

Only a few years later, Kruchenykh, Mayakovsky, and the Cubo-Futurists found themselves in the midst of a much different kind of revolution, whose breadth far exceeded the walls of St. Petersburg theatres and the boos of a scandalized intelligentsia. The February and

¹ Charlotte Douglass, "Victory over the Sun," *Russian History* 8, no. 1/2 (1981): 76, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24652389>.

October Revolutions of 1917 brought on abrupt and irreversible shifts in the realm of Russian culture. New questions emerged that challenged poets like Kruchenykh and Mayakovsky, and movements like Cubo-Futurism, to radically redefine the position they had occupied before the Revolution. What was the role of poetry in the revolutionary state? To what extent should the poet adapt themselves to the novel ideological and practical demands of post-Revolutionary Russia? Could poetry be political?

In this thesis, I track how Mayakovsky and Kruchenykh positioned their poetics, and Futurism as a whole, in the cultural politics of early Soviet Russia, with an eye towards the continuities and shifts in their poetic platform. The Futurists faced an evolving set of challenges, including the dominance of Marxist ideology and the scrutiny of the Bolshevik Party, a lack of access to critical resources, and stiff competition by rival art organizations like Alexander Bogdanov's Proletkult. In light of these, Mayakovsky and Kruchenykh proved able to adapt their presentation of the Futurist poet to the ideological and pragmatic demands of their moment. The primary shift in their poetic platform was a concession of the Futurist's leading role as poet-vanguard, as presented by Mayakovsky in the early journals *Futurist Gazette* (1918) and *The Art of the Commune* (1919), to the subordinated role of poet-specialist in support of the Communist Party, as was presented by Kruchenykh following his alignment with the Left Front of Arts in 1923. This shift enabled the continuation of the central feature of the Futurist poetic platform: a "revolution of form" that they saw as actively shaping and expanding human experience, and which necessarily preceded the coming of the socialist millennium. The revolution of form, however, was ultimately rejected by Party leaders as a "bohemian revolutionism," due to the Futurist's failure to fully root themselves in the Marxist-Leninist understanding of history.

The term “Russian Futurism” can refer to a wide variety of artistic and poetic organizations active before and after the 1917 Revolution. Before the revolution, the main strains of Russian Futurism were Cubo-Futurism, which was centered around the poets Vladimir Mayakovsky, David Burliuk, Alexei Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov, and Ego-Futurism, which was defined by the works of the poet Igor-Severyanin. After the revolution, “Futurist” was used interchangeably with the nebulous term “left artist” to describe any artist or poet within the avant-garde.² The Cubo-Futurists were, however, the most influential strand of Russian Futurism prior to the revolution. Additionally, a number of leading Cubo-Futurist poets, most notably Mayakovsky, Burliuk, Vasiliy Kamensky and Khlebnikov were among the first Russian artists to openly accept the October Revolution and the Bolshevik regime. In light of this, for the purposes of this essay, I use the terms “Futurist” and “Futurism” to describe the poets and artists who either originated in the pre-revolutionary Cubo-Futurist movement, or closely identified with its poetic platform.

Cubo-Futurism, as Leon Trotsky correctly pointed out in 1923, “originated in an eddy of bourgeois art, and could not have originated otherwise.”³ Most of the Cubo-Futurists were lower to middle-class Russian bohemians who moved to Moscow and St. Petersburg from the Russian provinces, as opposed to the dominant poets of the time, the Symbolists, who were largely from upper-class and aristocratic backgrounds.⁴ Marjorie Perloff in her book *The Futurist Moment*:

² Bengt Jangfeldt, *Mayakovskij and Futurism 1917-1921* (Upsalla: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1976), 35.

³ Leon Trotsky, “Futurism,” in *Literature and Revolution* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1957) https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revolution/.

⁴ Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture. with a New Pref.*, repr. ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007), 126

Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture, sees this fringe-status as giving rise to the Futurist's animosity towards the literary establishment.⁵ Poetic Cubo-Futurism originated in the 1911 Hylae group, the core members of which were Burliuk, Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, and Benedict Livshits. Hylae was galvanized by David Burliuk's discovery of the Italian Futurist Fillipo Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* (1909); Burliuk coined the term "budetlyane," a Russian equivalent of "Futurist" to describe the members of the Hylae group.⁶ The themes of Italian Futurism-- its glorification of speed, modernity, the machine and urban spaces-- informed the Hylae group's work, although, according to Viktor Markov in his *Russian Futurism: a History*, Mayakovsky "was the only real urbanist in the group"⁷. The term "Cubo-Futurism" became a popular label for Hylae in 1913, and the group's leaders accepted it as their official title the same year. The prefix "Cubo-" referred to the Cubo-Futurists appropriation of Cubist aesthetics, especially in terms of their emphasis on fragmentation, deconstruction and surface, in both their visual and poetic works. The Cubo-Futurists were similarly informed by Russian Primitivism, Impressionism, and the esoteric writings of Pyotr Ouspensky. While the Cubo-Futurists were, in a sense revolutionaries, they defined themselves according to the aesthetic discourse and trends of the small but vibrant world of the Russian avant-garde, rather than the no less vibrant world of Russian political revolutionaries.

⁵ Perloff, *The Futurist Moment*, 126.

⁶ Edward Brown *Mayakovsky: A Poet in the Revolution*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973) 42.

⁷ Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1968), 118.

In their debut 1912 manifesto, “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste,” the Hylae group defined themselves in opposition to the literary canon; “Throw Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, etc. off the ship of Modernity”⁸; and the then dominant Symbolist movement. Whereas the Symbolists had emphasized the symbolic content of language, the Futurists emphasized the formal, phonetic and visual quality of language, or “the Self-Sufficient (self-centered) Word.”⁹ Additionally, they positioned themselves in opposition to “the language of the past,” “common sense,” and “good taste,” which they saw as limiting the expressive capacity of the poet. The Cubo-Futurist’s poets’ emphasis on formal experimentation over symbolic content and established meaning was, for the Futurists, primarily a means of liberating the expressive capacity of the poet, and laying the groundwork for a language that could capture and glorify the experience of modernity. The two main figures of this thesis, Mayakovsky and Kruchenykh, continued to be heavily informed by a distinctly Futurist notion of formal revolution, even as they attempted to adapt themselves to the novel environment of early Soviet Russia.

Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930) was a Russian poet, playwright, socialist revolutionary, and leading member of the pre-revolutionary Cubo-Futurist movement. He became associated with Futurism after meeting David Burliuk while studying at the Moscow College of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in 1911. Burliuk was quickly taken by Mayakovsky, “a poorly dressed giant, unkempt and unwashed, with penetrating eyes and a deep

⁸ David Burliuk, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexei Kruchenykh, Velimir Khlebnikov, “Slap in the Face of Public Taste” in *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestos, 1912-1928*, ed. and trans. Anna M. Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988) 51.

⁹ Burliuk, et al. “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste,” in *Russian Futurism Through its Manifestos*, 52.

bass voice”¹⁰ who he soon recognized as a poetic genius. Mayakovsky’s name appeared on many of the Cubo-Futurists’ programmatic statements, including their 1912 manifesto “Slap in the Face of Public Taste.” Mayakovsky stood out from his Cubo-Futurist colleagues, however, in his attempt to connect Futurist poetics with a clearly defined set of political beliefs. As an adolescent, Mayakovsky had briefly joined the Bolshevik Party, and served three prison sentences for his political activities. As early as 1908, he became intent on creating a “Socialist art.”¹¹ When the Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917, Mayakovsky recalled; “To accept or not accept? There was no such question for me (or for other Moscow futurists) . My Revolution.”¹²

Alexei Yeliseevich Kruchenykh (1886-1968) was a Russian poet, and leading member of the Cubo-Futurist movement, best known for the invention of “transrational language,” or *zaum*. Kruchenykh became involved in the early stages of Russian Futurism after meeting David Burliuk in 1907. After 1912, he dropped his career as a visual artist and painter to pursue poetry full time, producing the lithographed book *Pomade* in 1913, which featured the first poem written in *zaum* language, “Dyr Bul Shchyl”.¹³ Unlike Mayakovsky, Kruchenykh did not have any outstanding political commitments. He continued to focus on developing his theory of *zaum*

¹⁰ Markov, Vladimir: 1968. *Russian Futurism: a History*. 32.

¹¹ Vladimir Mayakovsky, *I, Myself*, in *Vladimir Mayakovsky: Selected Work in Three Volumes*, (Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1985)vol. 1, 40.

¹² Mayakovsky, *I, Myself*, 36

¹³ Gerald J. Janacek, “Alekseii Eliseevich Kruchenykh 1886-1968: Poet and Literary Theorist” in *Reference Guide to Russian Literature*, ed. Nicole Christian and Neil Cornwell (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1999), 468-469.

until 1920 when he returned to Moscow from Tiflis, Georgia, and, in 1923, became associated with the pro-communist art organization Left Front of the Arts.

In chapter one, I focus on the Futurists' attempts to secure a place for Futurist poetics in the years immediately following the Revolution (1917-1920). I give an exposition of pre-revolutionary Futurist poetics through a reading of Cubo-Futurist programmatic statements such as "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" (1912). Next, I analyze Mayakovsky's programmatic and poetic texts published in the first post-revolutionary Futurist journals, *The Futurist Gazette* (1918) and *The Art of the Commune* (1918-1919), against the novel ideological and pragmatic demands of early Soviet Russia. Mayakovsky was already predisposed towards socialism and was, as a result, eager to define a role for the Futurist poet that was beneficial to the revolutionary cause. He argued for the role of the Futurist poet as a poet-vanguard, leading the masses in a "Revolution of Spirit" that was rooted firmly in the Futurist rejection of past language and literary forms, and formal approach to language. However, significant pressure from the rival art organization Proletkult, the Bolshevik cultural administration and later, in 1920, the Central Committee itself, caused Mayakovsky to modify his the role of the Futurist poet from poet-vanguard to poet-worker, and finally, under the auspices of the Left Front of the Arts, to poet-specialist. Despite the concession of the Futurist's leadership, however, a continued insistence on the superiority of Futurist poetics, and the necessity of a formal revolution remained central to each manifestation of the Futurist poet in service of the revolution.

In chapter two, I focus on the Futurists' efforts to secure a position for Futurist poetics in the early to late 1920's (1920-1928). Alexei Kruchenykh, who had no previous association to the Bolsheviks, and who spent the first years after the revolution living outside of Bolshevik territory

(1917-1920), serves as a case study in how the Futurists modified their rhetoric in order to fit the ideological and ideological demands of the moment. His transformation from a highly individualistic *zaum* poet, to poet-specialist in service of the revolution is evident in a series of theoretical texts, published between 1924 and 1928, on the subject of agitational-propaganda and Lenin's political rhetoric. In these texts, he made the rather compelling argument that the formal presentation of Marxist-Leninist ideology was as important as the ideology itself, especially when it came to impressing it in the minds of the Russian masses. In this sense, the poet-specialist in the hands of Kruchenykh came to resemble something close to a Western ad-man. Instead of manipulating sound and form to challenge the reader to make new associations, now Kruchenykh's poet deployed their formal skill to create easily remembered, jingle-like poems, that would impress their content on the minds of readers. Finally, I briefly discuss two of Kruchenykh's anti-kulak propaganda plays written near the end of the 1920's during the 1928 Grain Crisis and Joseph Stalin's rise to power.

In chapter three, I give an exposition of the reception of Futurist poetry by the key party leaders Anatoly Lunacharsky, Vladimir Lenin, and Leon Trotsky, in relation to the historical exigencies of early Soviet Russia and the cultural politics of Bolshevism. First, I examine the reception of Futurist poetry by the Commissar of People's Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky, in relation to the Party's embattled position during the Civil War (1917-1922). Next, I examine the emergence of Lenin and Trotsky's notion of cultural revolution during New Economic Policy, and its effect on Lenin and Trotsky's reception of Futurist poetry. Finally, I look at Trotsky's analysis of Futurism in his book, *Literature and Revolution*, in order to highlight the theoretical discrepancies in Futurist and Bolshevik ideas of Revolution. As a Marxist-Leninist,

Trotsky saw literature, and culture in general, as emerging directly from its social and historical context.

Futurism, Trotsky argued, emerged from the values and cultural discourse of the bohemian intelligentsia. While their commitment to the revolution was genuine, because of their rejection of the past, the Futurists failed to fully recognize and purge themselves of their bourgeois habits, and failed to root themselves in the Marxist model of historical development. The “revolution of form” prematurely anticipated the culture of the future without considering the Marxist model of cultural and economic development necessary to reach it. Socialism could not be reached simply by a formal rupture in language, poetry, literature and art. Instead, “revolutionary art” needed to contribute directly to the construction of a strong cultural and economic base from which “socialist art” would emerge. The “revolution of form” was, for Trotsky and the Party, a fanciful projection of the bohemian intelligentsia, with no direct connection to the proletarian political revolution.

Chapter One: Vladimir Mayakovsky and the Poet as Vanguard, 1917-1921

Revolution's days have yet to be sung
by the thousand-page book of time.
Into the streets, the crowds among,
futurists,
drummers,
masters of rhyme !

-Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Order of the Day to the Army of Arts"

On February 27th, the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky stood up from his desk at the Automotive School in St. Petersburg and rushed to the window. Outside, crowds of people poured into the streets, their voices joining in unison to the revolutionary strains of the Marseillaise. At the time, Mayakovsky was a leading figure in the Russian Cubo-Futurist movement. For Mayakovsky and his fellow Futurist poets, the events of the February and October Revolutions held immense promise, both confirming to a large extent their doctrine of historical rupture and presenting an opportunity to fully realize their vision of creating the culture of the future. At the same time, the 1917 Revolution presented the Futurists with a novel set of challenges. Foremost among these was the competition posed by the Communist Party and the popular art organization Proletkult for leadership of cultural development.

Prior to the Revolution, the Futurists considered themselves to be at the vanguard of a revolution of their own, albeit one that was largely limited to the realm of aesthetics rather than politics. For the Futurists, the creation of new poetic and artistic forms would break the reader free of ingrained habits and modes of perception, forcing them to create new semantic and visual

associations and “see” the work anew. This “perceptual millenarianism”¹⁴ had implications that extended beyond poetry as such to a broader notion of cultural renewal. Through seeing the world anew, the Futurists saw themselves as reckoning in a world of heightened consciousness and creative freedom. They faced the challenge of continuing to advance their idiosyncratic notion of revolution under the ideological hegemony of the Bolsheviks, and of justifying their role as cultural leaders under the criticism of their artistic rivals the popular art organization Proletkult.

In this chapter, I use the theoretical writing and poetry of the leading Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky as a case study for determining how the Futurist poets defined their role in the conditions immediately following the 1917 Revolutions. I focus primarily on texts published by Mayakovsky the early Futurist journals *The Futurist Gazette* (1918) and *The Art of the Commune* (1918-1919). In these texts, Mayakovsky continued to assert the cultural superiority of Futurism despite significant institutional pressure from the Party’s cultural regime and the influential organization, Proletkult. In order to secure a leading role for himself and his fellow futurist poets in the post-revolutionary cultural realm, Mayakovsky put forth the notion of what I term the “poet-vanguard.” While Mayakovsky had been motivated by a desire to create a “socialist art” since 1910, he rooted his notion of the revolutionary poet primarily in Futurist, rather than Marxist, ideology. Thus, while Mayakovsky and many of the Futurist poets openly declared their support of the Bolshevik regime, from October 1917 until the end of the Civil War in 1920, they were primarily concerned with advancing their own revolutionary platform, oftentimes in direct contradiction with the dominant Marxist ideology.

¹⁴ Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 30.

Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky (1893-1920) was a Soviet Russian poet, playwright, artist and leading figure in the Russian Futurist movement. In the Soviet Union, he was canonized as “the Poet of the Revolution,” after Joseph Stalin expressed his approval of Mayakovsky’s work, describing him as “the best and the most talented poet of our Soviet epoch.”¹⁵ Mayakovsky was an avowed socialist, having joined the Bolshevik Party in 1908 and serving three prison sentences for his political activities¹⁶. After being released from Butyrski prison in 1910, Mayakovsky left the party and dedicated himself to creating “a Socialist art.”¹⁷ Despite his canonization by the Soviet government and his time in the party, however, Mayakovsky’s notion of “socialist art” was heavily informed by his leading position in the Russian Futurist movement and its most influential pre-revolutionary manifestation, Cubo-Futurism.

Cubo-Futurism was a Russian avant-garde movement, centered around the poets David Burliuk, Mayakovsky, Alexei Kruchenykh, and Velemir Khlebnikov. The Futurists considered themselves to be the vanguard of a revolution in art and poetry that bore little to no resemblance to the revolutionary doctrine of their Bolshevik contemporaries. In their debut 1913 manifesto, “A Slap in the Taste of Public Taste,” Mayakovsky and his colleagues defined the theoretical doctrine of the Cubo-Futurist movement. The most striking of these was an uncompromising rejection of the literary canon. They issued the command “Throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy,

¹⁵ Joseph Stalin, quoted in Holquist, Michael. "The Mayakovsky Problem." *Yale French Studies*, no. 39 (1967): 133.

¹⁶ Vladimir Mayakovsky, *I Myself*, 1928, in *V. Mayakovsky: Selected Work in Three Volumes* trans. Alex Miller (Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1985), 1: 29-43.

¹⁷ Mayakovsky, *I Myself*, 36.

etc., etc., overboard from the ship of modernity” and declared the right of the poet “To feel an insurmountable hatred for the language existing before their time.”¹⁸ For the Futurists, the literary canon was obsolete and incapable of capturing and fully realizing the experience of modern life. “The past” they wrote, was simply “too tight.”¹⁹ To the modern reader, they argued, Pushkin was “less intelligible than hieroglyphics.”²⁰ They positioned themselves as the only group of poets able to adequately capture the spirit of their contemporary moment. “*We* alone are the *face* of *our* Time. Through us the horn of time blows in the art of the word.”²¹ The Cubo-Futurists considered themselves to be at the cutting edge of Russian poetry. A decisive rupture from the past and the Futurist “art of the word” were the only means of moving past the limitations of the literary canon to a more flexible, creative, and above all, modern language.

The Futurists based their “art of the word” in the concept of the “self-sufficient (self-centered) Word.”²² For Mayakovsky, Burliuk, Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov, the poetic value of language lay in the formal, orthographic and phonetic characteristics of language, or “the word as such,” rather than in its semantic content. In putting this theoretical model into practice, they rejected “word formation of and word pronunciation according to grammatical rules,” in return

¹⁸ David Burliuk, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexei Kruchenykh, Velimir Khlebnikov, “Slap in the Face of Public Taste” in *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestos, 1912-1928*, ed. and trans. Anna M. Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988) 51.

¹⁹ Burliuk et al., “Slap in the Face of Public Taste,” 51.

²⁰ Burliuk et al., 51.

²¹ Burliuk et al. 51.

²² Burliuk et al., 52.

for an experimental approach to syntax; “We loosened up syntax.”²³ They routinely incorporated neologisms into their poems as a means of expressing concepts and experiences that eluded the established Russian lexicon. They emphasized the physical appearance of their poetry, rejecting “normal orthography,” and considering “the graphic flourishes as an inseparable part of the work its corrections, and the graphic flourishes of creative expectations.”²⁴ They emphasized the sound of a word over its content: “we understand vowels as time and space (a characteristic of thrust), and consonants as color, sound smell.”²⁵ Finally, the Futurist poets prided themselves in their unconventional approach to rhythm. “We shattered rhythms... We stopped looking for meters in textbooks; every motion generates for the poet a new free rhythm.”²⁶ By focusing on the formal and physical characteristics of language, rather than its content, the Futurists aimed to overcome the limitations of objective representation and literary convention to achieve a higher level of expressive freedom.

The degree to which each poet implemented these components of Futurist poetics into their works varied significantly. Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov heavily emphasized the sonic aspect of poetry in their efforts to create a transrational language (*zaum*), at times rejecting language entirely in favor of compositions of pure sound like Kruchenykh’s poem “Dyr bul shchyl”.

Dyr bul shchyl

²³ David Burliuk, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexei Kruchenykh, Velimir Khlebnikov, “A Trap for Judges” in *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestos, 1912-1928*, ed. Anna M. Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988) 53.

²⁴ David Burliuk et al., “A Trap For Judges,” 53.

²⁵ Burliuk et al., 54.

²⁶ Burliuk et al., 55.

ubeshshchur

skum

vy so bu

r l èz²⁷

Mayakovsky was distinguished from his colleagues' by his use of inventive urban metaphors, novel rhyming patterns, and inventive rhythmic structure. He often inserted himself, along with details from his life, into his poetry in the form of a larger-than-life poetic "I". In his 1914 poem "A Cloud In Trousers," this "I" appeared as a poet-prophet with a "golden mouth,"²⁸ who abases himself in the alienating experience of modern life to give his voice to the downtrodden masses, who Homer and Ovid had overlooked. "Damn Homer and Ovid/ For not having made/ characters like us/ pock marked and sooty."²⁹ In addition to contrasting this mass-prophetic "I" with intensely personal passages, Mayakovsky demonstrated his socialist beliefs and ability to make remarkably well-informed guesses: "Where men's vision fail,/ I see 1916 come,/ Leading the hungry masses,/ Wearing the thorny crown of revolution."³⁰ Even before the 1917 Revolution, Mayakovsky's poetry was colored by sympathy for the masses and an awareness of the poet's social duty.

²⁷ Alexei Kruchenykh, "Dyr Bul Shchyl," 1913, in *The Futurist Moment: Avant-garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture. with a New Pref.*, by Marjorie Perloff (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007), 123.

²⁸ Vladimir Mayakovsky, "A Cloud in Trousers," trans. P. Lemke, 1915, in *Russian Poetry: the Modern Period*, ed. John Glad and Daniel Weissbort (University of Iowa Press, 1978), 17.

²⁹ Mayakovsky, "A Cloud in Trousers," 17.

³⁰ Mayakovsky, 18.

The Futurists saw this “art of the word” as uniquely suited to creating a “language of modernity”. In their 1913 essay, *The Word as Such*, Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov wrote, “the futurian wordwrights use chopped up words, half-words, and their odd artful combination (transrational language), thus achieving the very greatest expressiveness, and precisely this distinguishes the swift language of modernity.”³¹ The Futurists, by rapidly reconfiguring language to comply with the expressive demands of the moment, created a poetic language they saw as swift, expressive, and capable of keeping up with the rapid pace of modern life. Mayakovsky echoed this in 1915, pointing to the inability of established language to adapt to the changes in modern life. “The old language,” he wrote “was powerless to keep up with life’s leaps and bounds.”³² Kruchenykh made the connection between Futurist poetics and the poet’s experience of the modern world in his 1913 essay “New Ways of the Word,” “We [the Futurist poets] loosened up grammar and syntax; we recognized that in order to depict our dizzy contemporary life and our even more impetuous future, we must combine words in a new way, and the more disorder we introduce into the sentence the better.”³³ In this sense, the Futurist emphasis on formal experimentation and the disruption of literary convention was a direct reflection of the poets’ “dizzy contemporary life.” The Futurists did not seek to solidify this dizzying experience into concrete language, however. Instead, their emphasis on formal

³¹Alexei Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov, *The Word as Such*, 1913. In *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestos, 1912-1928*, trans. and ed. by Anna M. Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988), 61.

³²Vladimir Mayakovsky, “A Drop of Tar,” 1915. in *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestos, 1912-1928*, ed. Anna M. Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988) 53. 101.

³³Alexei Kruchenykh, *New Ways of the Word*, 1913, in *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestos, 1912-1928*, ed. Anna M. Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988) 53., 73.

innovation was a means of capturing the indeterminacy and possibility for change that inhered within it.

Finally, the Futurists connected their poetic innovation to a broader project of cultural renewal. By experimenting with the formal, phonetic and graphic aspects of poetry, the Futurists saw themselves as renewing the Russian language as a whole, ridding it of clichés and patterns of speech in order to fully realize its expressive capacity. This notion of linguistic renewal was given its clearest expression by the formalist scholar Viktor Shklovsky, in his 1914 essay “The Resurrection of the Word.” He wrote, “When words are used as general concepts, when they serve, so to speak, as algebraic symbols devoid of imagery, when they are used in everyday speech, when they are neither fully spoken nor fully heard-- then they become familiar, and neither their internal forms (images) nor the external one (sounds) are experienced any more.”³⁴ Language, through repeated everyday use, loses the “images” or meaning it originally contained, to the point where the listener or speaker no longer experiences it. The Futurists, by playing with rhyme patterns, roots, sound and stress patterns, broke the reader out of their habitual mode of perception, and allowed language to be “seen” rather than “merely” recognized. Shklovsky wrote in his 1917 essay, “Art as Device,” “the goal of art is to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things; the device of art is the “ostranenie” of things and the complication of the form, which increases the duration and complexity of perception, as the process of perception is its own end in art and must be prolonged.”³⁵ Shklovsky saw the formal “device” of experiential renewal, or “ostranenie” as the defining feature of art and poetry in general.

³⁴ Viktor Shklovsky, “Resurrection of the Word,” 1914, in *Viktor Shklovsky: a Reader*, trans. Alexandra Berlina (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 64.

³⁵ Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Device,” 80.

Shklovsky and the Futurists were less concerned with representing well established ideas or poetic tropes than they were with actively challenging their readers to create new associations and to experience the world from a fresh vantage point.

In her book on the Saint Petersburg intelligentsia in early Soviet Russia, Katerina Clark coins the term “perceptual millenarianism” to describe this widely accepted imperative within the avant-garde. In order for the millennium to take place people would need to “see” the world anew.³⁶ She writes, “The avant-garde ideologues claimed that through their art modern, bourgeois conventional man with his tired assumptions might be jolted out of his epistemological rut and helped to “see” and therefore “be” anew”³⁷ Likewise, the Futurists saw formal experimentation as a means of interrupting the readers’ habits and normal associations to prepare them for a future of unbounded creative expression. They considered themselves to be “budetlyane,” a term created by David Burliuk that meant “men of the Future.” The notable Futurist opera, *Victory over the Sun* (1913), was a mosaic of Futurist formal experiments, including a libretto written in *zaum* by Kruchenykh, an atonal score composed by Michael Matiushen, and a Cubo-Futurist set by Kazimir Malevich. It depicted a Futurist vision of the Future, where men are liberated from the past through an aggressive disruption of established forms and meaning. The opera reaches its climax as futuristic “Strongmen” conquer the sun, a symbol of established meaning, and transform the world into a permanently dark urban

³⁶ Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of*, 30.

³⁷ Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of*, 30.

landscape.³⁸ The Futurists thus not only saw themselves as creating an effective language of modernity, but also as hearkening in a future of boundless human expressiveness.

By 1917, the Futurists were a well-established cultural movement. Their poetry became increasingly recognized by the cultural establishment as an important contribution to Russian literature. This was due in part to the serious critical reception of Futurist poetics by highly regarded scholars like Viktor Shklovsky and the writer Maxim Gorky.³⁹ In his 1915 manifesto, “A Drop of Tar”, Mayakovsky heralded the Futurists rising influence in the cultural realm; “the entire nation is Futurist,/ FUTURISM HAS SEIZED RUSSIA IN A DEATH GRIP.”⁴⁰ The Futurists had reached such a level of popularity that “Futurism, as a specific group, died, but like a flood it overflows into all of you.”⁴¹ This popularity, however, strained against a core element of the Futurist identity: their antagonistic attitude towards the literary establishment. In 1913 the Cubo-Futurists had declared the right of the poet to “stand on the ‘rock’ of the word ‘we’ amidst the sea of boos and outrage.”⁴² Now that they were recognized by the cultural establishment as a legitimate movement, the seas of boos and outrage subsided, and the “we” of Futurism as a distinct group of poets, had died. The historian of Russian Futurism Vladimir Markov saw this as leading to a period of stagnation in Futurist poetry; it became “watered down” and “lacking in its

³⁸ One of the set descriptions reads, “Houses are depicted by exterior walls but the windows go strangely inwards like perforated tubes many windows arranged in uneven rows and it seems that they move suspiciously.” Alexei Kruchenykh, “Victory over the Sun”, composed by Mikhail Matyushin. Translated by Larissa Shmaillo in *Intranslation*, (The Brooklyn Rail, 2012), accessed December 6, 2020, <https://intranslation.brooklynrail.org/russian/victory-over-the-sun/>.

³⁹ Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1968), 277-283.

⁴⁰ Mayakovsky, “A Drop of Tar,” 101.

⁴¹ Mayakovsky, 101.

⁴² Burliuk et. al. “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste,” 101.

initial freshness.”⁴³ The Futurist poet, Sergei Tretyakov reflected back on this period in 1923, “If there had been no Revolution, Futurism could have easily degenerated into the plaything for the consumption of sated salons.”⁴⁴ While Tretyakov’s statement was filtered through the rhetoric of a later iteration of Russian Futurism, the Left Front of the Arts, he was correct in pointing out that the 1917 Revolution was a critical moment for Russian Futurism.

The 1917 Revolution brought about a state of uncertainty that challenged long standing notions of political legitimacy and cultural order. It was, in a sense, the “perceptual millennium” the Futurists had prophesied as early as 1913. The tsar had been overthrown. From the Bolshevik’s seizure of power in October 1917 until 1920, a brutal Civil War enveloped a large portion of the country. Under the policy of War Communism currency had been all but abolished, and the economy was nationalized. Mayakovsky, himself an avowed socialist, enthusiastically embraced the October Revolution. He recalled in his autobiography “To accept or not accept? There was no such question for me (or for other Moscow futurists). My Revolution.”⁴⁵ While they had all but fully established themselves as a major force in Russian cultural life, the Futurists now faced a drastically altered environment that brought with it a novel set of challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, the Futurists could no longer rely on the recognition and material support given by cultural elites.⁴⁶ On the other, the Revolution represented an unprecedented opportunity to renew their movement, and to “see” the world anew

⁴³ Markov, *Russian Futurism: a History*, 283.

⁴⁴ Sergei Tretyakov, “From Where to When?” 1923, in *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestos, 1912-1928*, ed. Anna M. Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988) 209.

⁴⁵ Mayakovsky, *I Myself*, 40.

⁴⁶ Halina Stephan, *"Lef" and Left Front of the Arts* (Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1981), 1.

through implementing the Futurist principles of historical rupture and linguistic renewal on a massive scale.

The Futurist's first publication after the 1917 Revolutions was *The Futurist Gazette* (1918), which was published and printed by Mayakovsky, Burliuk, and the Futurist poet Vasilij Kamensky, "on funds provided by Lev Grinkrug."⁴⁷ The newspaper contained a number of articles and poems by Mayakovsky and other Futurists that provide insight into how the Futurists positioned themselves in the months immediately after the October Revolution. Mayakovsky's poem "Revolution: A Poet's Chronicle," published in *The Futurist Gazette*, provides insight into the poet's experience of the Revolution as an event that confirmed the Futurist doctrine of historical rupture and cultural renewal. In his article, "Open Letter to the Workers," Mayakovsky argued for the Futurist revolution in form as a necessary complement to socialist revolution.

In Mayakovsky's "Revolution: A Poet's Chronicle," the poet rushes to the window and sees "people," "horses"; "street-lamps" and "buildings pouring into the street "in crowds."⁴⁸ An image, "more wanted than bread,/ more thirsted for than water," rises up from the ambience of the street, "from the singing of crowds/ who knows? -/or the guardsmen's bugle-brass, ready to bust,"⁴⁹ to address the crowd.

Citizens!

Today topples your thousand-year-old Before.

⁴⁷ Bengt Jangfeldt, *Mayakovskij and Futurism 1917-1921* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1976), 17.

⁴⁸ Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Revolution: A Poet's Chronicle," trans. Dorian Rottenburg, 1917, in *V. Mayakovsky: Selected Verse in Three Volumes* (Moscow: Raduga, 1985), 1: 68.

⁴⁹ Mayakovsky, "Revolution: a Poet's Chronicle," 68.

Today the foundations of worlds are revised.

Today,

to the very last coat-button, you're

to start remodeling everyone's lives .

The parallel between the image's declaration to the crowd and Futurist iconoclasm is clear. The Revolution appeared to Mayakovsky as a manifestation of the Futurist's long awaited rupture from the past, and an unprecedented opportunity to construct the world anew. Furthermore, his use of the word "image" implied his reception of the Revolution as an interruptive aesthetic experience, much in the same way that Shklovsky described Futurist poetry as interrupting perceptive habits to reveal the latent "image" of the word.

Boris Groys, in his study of the Russian avant-garde, confirms this theoretical parallel: "the avant-garde and formalist theory of the 'shift' that lifted things from their normal contexts and 'made them strange' by deautomizing perception and rendering them 'visible' in a special way was no longer merely the basis of avant-garde art but an explanation of the Russian citizen's everyday experience."⁵⁰ The Revolution was, in other words, a shared experience of rupture realized in the everyday lives of Russian citizens. Finally, this shared experience formed the basis of an idiosyncratic notion of collective identity that differed greatly from that of the Bolsheviks. For Mayakovsky, it was the "image," or the shared experience of revolution, rather than proletarian or class identity, that transformed the odd assortment of "buildings", "people" and "street-lamps" into a unified collective of "citizens."⁵¹

⁵⁰ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 20.

⁵¹ Mayakovsky, "Revolution: a Poet's Chronicle," 69.

Mayakovsky's article "Open Letter to the Workers" (1918) differed from "Revolution: A Poet's Chronicle" in that, rather than bearing witness to the revolution as a shared experience of rupture, he argued for the Futurists' active role in perpetuating this experience through formal innovation. In the letter, Mayakovsky addressed himself to the workers, writing "To you, who have inherited the legacy of Russia, to you, who (I believe!) tomorrow will become masters of the entire world, I address the question: with what fantastic edifices will you cover the place of yesterday's flame?"⁵² He expressed a deep dissatisfaction in the continued popularity of bourgeois art, which was for him exemplified by the performance of Verdi's operas *Traviata* and *Aida*, "from the stages of conquered theatres."⁵³ Mayakovsky reprimanded the workers for reading poetry which featured "the same roses from the master's greenhouse," by which he presumably meant the outdated themes of the Russian nobility and bourgeoisie, and for standing "awestruck before paintings depicting the splendors of the past."⁵⁴ The continued presence of these literary forms carried the risk of increased complacency among the workers, and an inability to sustain the "frenzy" of revolution. "Or," he asked, "when the elements, raised to a frenzy by the revolution, settle down, will you, with chains on vests, go out on holidays to play civilized croquet on the grounds in front of your regional Soviets?"⁵⁵ The "frenzy" associated

⁵² Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Otkrytoe Pismo Rabochim" [Open Letter to the Workers] 1918, in *Mayakovsky V. V. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii: v 13. T.* (Moscow: Gorky Institute of World Literature, 1955) 12: [no page numbers] [https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/%D0%9E%D1%82%D0%BA%D1%80%D1%8B%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B5_%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%8C%D0%BC%D0%BE_%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%87%D0%B8%D0%BC_\(%D0%9C%D0%B0%D1%8F%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9\)](https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/%D0%9E%D1%82%D0%BA%D1%80%D1%8B%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B5_%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%8C%D0%BC%D0%BE_%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%87%D0%B8%D0%BC_(%D0%9C%D0%B0%D1%8F%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9))

⁵³ Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Otkrytoe Pismo Rabochim".

⁵⁴ Mayakovsky.

⁵⁵ Mayakovsky.

with revolution is reminiscent of the Futurists' portrayal of modernity as a "dizzying" or "swift" experience. By juxtaposing this "frenzy" with the ingrained habits of the bourgeoisies, Mayakovsky positioned it as a space of renewed possibility, much in the same way that the "image" of revolution emerges from the cacophony of the February Revolution to announce the possibility of constructing the world anew. Without rejecting past cultural forms, the workers risked falling back into their habitual modes of perception, losing this space of possibility, and returning to the bourgeois ways of the past.

As a countermeasure to this risk, Mayakovsky proposed the creation of a new culture, or a "Revolution of Spirit" that would both capture and perpetuate the experience of the revolution. "Only the explosion of the Revolution of Spirit will rid us of the rags of old art."⁵⁶ He conceptualized this "Revolution of Spirit," as taking place primarily in the realm of formal innovation. If the revolution represented a drastic shift in the everyday experience of Russian citizens, then it needed to be matched by an equally drastic shift in forms of representation. "The revolution of content-- socialist-anarchism--" Mayakovsky wrote, "is senseless without the revolution of form -- futurism."⁵⁷ The revolution was an interruptive experience that could not be represented using the artistic and poetic forms of the past. Just as the Futurists had initially positioned themselves as the only poets capable of conveying the experience of modernity, Mayakovsky now asserted the unique capacity of Futurist formal experimentation to represent and actively advance the experience of revolution.

⁵⁶ Mayakovsky.

⁵⁷ Mayakovsky.

It was the Futurists, and not the workers themselves, that would lead this “Revolution of Spirit”. Mayakovsky invited the workers to accept Futurism much like they would accept scraps from a beneficent lord; “With greediness tear the pieces of the healthy young rough art given to you by us.”⁵⁸ Whereas Mayakovsky addressed the workers with the second person pronoun “you” throughout the letter, he closed the letter with the third person pronouns “us” and “we,” referring, presumably, to himself and his Futurist colleagues. It was the “artists,” and not the workers, who would lead Russia through its aesthetic transformation. In their hands, “the gray dust of cities” would be transformed into “one hundred-colored rainbows.” They would cause “thunderous music, transformed in the flutes of volcanoes” to “sound incessantly from the ridges of volcanoes.”⁵⁹ Mayakovsky concluded his letter with the distinctly Futurist declaration; “One thing is clear for us-- the first page of the new history of art has been opened by us.”⁶⁰ The Futurists, at least those who were close to Mayakovsky in 1917, once again considered themselves to be at the vanguard of a revolution in cultural life.

Despite the fact that it was at times vague and prone to imaginative flights of fancy, Mayakovsky’s “Revolution of the Spirit” represented a relatively well articulated notion of revolution, the implications of which extended beyond the strictly aesthetic into the realm of collective identity formation and anti-reactionary politics. Mayakovsky’s “image” of revolution is a shared experience that transforms the masses into a collective of citizens, and announces the possibility to create the world anew. The resemblance between the Revolution as image,

⁵⁸ Mayakovsky.

⁵⁹ Mayakovsky.

⁶⁰ Mayakovsky.

Shklovsky's notion of *ostranenie*, or estrangement, and the Futurists' emphasis on formal rupture as a means of perpetual renewal, indicates that Mayakovsky saw the "revolution of form" as a means of representing and sustaining the experience of the Revolution for the masses. Without this experiential framing, the Revolutionary experience risked being recrystallized into the immobile habits of the past and losing its status as an experience of shared possibility. The ability of Mayakovsky and the Futurists of *The Futurist Gazette* to actually realize this "Revolution of Spirit," however, was severely limited.

While the Futurists sought to advance themselves as the leaders of this "Revolution of Spirit," after the 1917 Revolutions, they were confronted by a new, and often hostile, set of conditions. Foremost among these was the economic scarcity brought on by the Civil War, the exclusive hold on critical resources by the Bolshevik government, and the ideological opposition posed by the Party and the popular art organization Proletkult.

In order for Mayakovsky to realize his dream of transforming dust into rainbows, he would have needed an enormous amount of material resources. Thus, the most first and most obvious obstacle to the Futurists' realizing the "Revolution of Spirit" was their limited access to material and financial support. With the nationalization of the economy in June 1918, as part of the Party's policy of War Communism, and the mass emigration of cultural elites on whom the Futurists had relied for funding prior to the revolution, the Futurists had to look elsewhere for support⁶¹. It was no longer plausible for Mayakovsky and his colleagues to fund and print *The Futurist Gazette* on their own with the support of benefactors like Lev Grinkrug. Only a single issue of the newspaper was published. The Bolshevik cultural administration, the People's

⁶¹ Halina Stephan, *"Lef" and Left Front*, 1.

Commissariat of Enlightenment, or Narkompros, had a monopoly on critical resources, such as printing presses and studio space. Its leader, Anatoli Lunacharsky, was sympathetic to the Futurists and, seeking artists to support the Bolshevik regime, encouraged Mayakovsky and his publisher and mentor Osip Brik to join the IZO (Department of Fine Arts) section of the Art Department of Narkompros.⁶² Mayakovsky was receptive to Narkompros' offer, stating "It is necessary to greet the new government and enter into contact with it."⁶³

His mentor and publisher Osip Brik, however, was initially distrustful of Lunacharsky. This was primarily for the support Narkompros provided to the art organization Proletkult, whose populist notion of revolutionary art challenged the Futurists status as cultural vanguard.⁶⁴ Under the leadership of the Bolshevik theoretician Alexander Bogdanov, Proletkult advanced the belief that the new socialist art could only come from the workers themselves. For Proletkultists, the role of the established artists was not, as Mayakovsky argued, to invent a new socialist culture for the workers, but to educate the workers in the literary and artistic canon, and to allow socialist culture to emerge from the workers organically. The government's support of this bottom-up model of cultural development threatened the Futurists' status as vanguard of "the Revolution of Spirit" and their belief in the inherent superiority of their aesthetic platform. In a 1917 statement clarifying his position on Bolshevik cultural policy, published in the journal *New Life*, Brik wrote, "The true path lies only in firm adherence to one's cultural convictions; one must propagate them wherever culture is in danger, defending it with courage against all

⁶² Jangfeldt, *Mayakovskij and Futurism*, 31.

⁶³ Jangfeld, 31.

⁶⁴ Bengt Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky: A Biography* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014), EPUB.

vandalism, including that of the Bolsheviks.”⁶⁵ In other words, artists, poets and writers could not jettison their “cultural convictions,” and wait for socialist culture to emerge from the workers. Embedded in this was an implicit defense of the superiority of futurist “cultural convictions” and the necessity of perpetuating them in the novel conditions of post-revolution Russia.

Nevertheless, Mayakovsky and Brik eventually turned to Narkompros for financial and material support. Brik joined Lunacharsky’s Art Department of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment and secured funding to print the journal *Art of the Commune*. This alignment with the Bolsheviks “had the practical benefit of giving the Futurists their first access to a printing press.”⁶⁶ *The Art of the Commune* became the platform for the IZO (Department of Fine Arts) section of Narkompros, which was home to a wide array of avant-garde artists, including Suprematists, Constructivists, as well as Futurists. While *The Art of the Commune* signaled the Futurists’ acceptance of Bolshevik authority, they nevertheless continued to assert Futurism and Futurist poetry as the supreme revolutionary art. Mayakovsky published a series of poems that functioned as programmatic statements of *The Art of the Commune*’s editorial board.⁶⁷ In his study of early Soviet Futurism, Bengt Jangfeldt writes, “Since Majakovskij published his poems as editorials, they can be regarded as representative not only of Majakovskij, but to an equally great extent of the avant-garde grouped around IZO; the poems also harmonized with the general

⁶⁵ Osip Brik, “My Position,” in “Selected Criticism,” ed. Natasha Curchanova, *October*, no. 134 (Fall 2019): 80.

⁶⁶ Halina Stephan, *“Lef” and Left Front of the Arts*, 1.

⁶⁷ Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky and Futurism*, 60.

content of the papers.”⁶⁸ These poems, “Order of the Day to the Army of the Arts,” “It’s too Early to Rejoice,” and “The Worker-Poet” reflected Mayakovsky’s continued insistence on the leading role of the Futurist poet, and, eventually, his willingness to adapt his rhetoric to the political demands of the Party.

In his “Order of the Day to the Army of Arts,” Mayakovsky openly criticized the Bolsheviks cultural policy as inadequate for mobilizing the masses in service of the Revolution. The poem opens with the lines, “Old geezers, in moss-grown brigades/ drool the same drool of old.”⁶⁹ By “old-geezers,” Mayakovsky likely referred to officers in the Red Army, although considering the militarization of the Party during the Civil War, he may have meant this as a broader label for Party members. That these old geezers “drool the same drool of old” was a reference to Lunacharsky, who defended the importance of Russia’s cultural heritage, and even published a number of editorials in *Art of the Commune* stressing his stance. Mayakovsky connected this adherence to past cultural forms to what he saw as the Party’s inability to fully mobilize the Red Army. “It isn’t enough to line up in pairs/ in red pants starched with ribbons and stiff with starch/ no sovdep’ll make armies go anywhere/ if musicians don’t make up a march.”⁷⁰ “Sovdep” referred to soviet deputies, the locally elected representatives of Soviet Russia’s highest governing body, the Congress of Soviets of the Soviet Union. The musicians were, of course, the Futurists. By making the armies ability to “go anywhere” contingent upon the Futurist poets’ ability to “make up a march,” Mayakovsky was placing the Futurists on the

⁶⁸ Jangfeldt, 60.

⁶⁹ Vladimir Mayakovsky, “Order of the Day to the Army of Arts,” trans. Dorian Rotenburg, 1918, in *V. Mayakovsky: Selected Verse in Three Volumes* (Moscow: Raduga, 1985), 1: 76.

⁷⁰ Mayakovsky, “Order of the Day,” 76.

same level as the Party's highest governing body. Despite the fact that *The Art of the Commune* was funded by Narkompros and purportedly supported the Bolshevik government, this was an open declaration from Mayakovsky that the Futurists were the Party's equals, rather than their subordinates, in the revolutionary cause.

The "march" Mayakovsky believed could help the Party better mobilize its forces was distinctly Futurist. First, it could only be created through a Futurist rupture from the past. He declared, "Only he is a communist worth the name/ who burns the last bridge to retreat. Futurists/ leave off waddling, lame,/ into the future-- leap!"⁷¹ Here, the Futurist destruction of the past not only made them the best equipped to represent and perpetuate the "frenzy" of revolution; it also made them the best communists. Furthermore, the Futurist "march" in the poem is based in sound, rather than thematic or ideological content, a core feature of Futurist poetics. The poet brings destruction to the streets-- "Drag pianos out into the streets,/ Drums with boat-hooks from windows dash."-- creating an ambient sonic experience, "Slam!/ Bang!/ Crash!," that frames and augments the "armies'" experience of the Revolution. Mayakovsky referenced the Futurist emphasis on sound; "Pile sound upon sound/ and forward,/ whistling page after page/ there's still good consonants to be found. R./ S./ H."⁷² In other words, by burning the bridge to the past, and by creating and reflecting the ambience of Revolution in their poetry, Mayakovsky's Futurist provided a collective "march" or "song" that was better suited to mobilizing the masses than the literary and poetic forms of the past. The poem closes, "Revolutions days have yet to be sung/ by the thousand page book of time./ Into the streets, the

⁷¹ Mayakovsky, 76.

⁷² Mayakovsky, 76.

crowds among,/ Futurists,/ drummers,/ masters of rhyme!”⁷³ Even after aligning with the Party, Mayakovsky still believed that the Futurist poets should take a leading role in the Revolution. The “master of rhyme” still resembled the role Mayakovsky had put forth for the Futurists in his 1918 “Open Letter to the Workers.”

The extent to which Mayakovsky was able to assert the superiority of Futurist poetry, however, was once again limited. While the Futurists had secured a level of material support, they still faced ideological opposition by non-Futurist art organizations and the Bolshevik cultural authorities. Proletkult theoreticians were overwhelmingly dismissive of the Futurists. They accused the Futurists of being individualistic and symptomatic of the bourgeois decay that had characterized the pre-revolutionary period. For the Proletkultists, who emphasized the class origins of poets and writers over their technical ability, the Futurists' bourgeois origins prevented them from laying claim to an authentically revolutionary art. The Futurists' poetry in particular was the subject of frequent attacks for its “incomprehensibility” to proletarian readers. Jangfeldt attributes this to “not only a lack of understanding of the new literature, but also a conscious unwillingness to understand.”⁷⁴ Kruchenykh's sound poem *Dyr bur schyl* was frequently invoked as emblematic of Futurist decadence, while Mayakovsky was seen by Proletkult as a corruptive influence on the workers. Bogdanov, Proletkult's head theoretician, singled out Mayakovsky as being a “wry advisor” and having a negative influence on proletarian poets who sought to emulate him.⁷⁵ The leader of Narkompros, Lunacharsky, was no less skeptical of the Futurists'

⁷³ Mayakovsky, 76.

⁷⁴ Jangfeldt, *Mayakovskij and Futurism*, 83.

⁷⁵ Jangfeldt, 84.

value as revolutionary poets, a point which will be discussed in chapter three of this thesis. Mayakovsky, despite his best efforts to do so, could not simply *assert* that the Futurists alone were the leaders of the Revolution. Instead, he, along with his colleagues at *The Art of the Commune*, needed to adapt themselves to the ideological demands of the moment.

Mayakovsky's editorial poem "Worker Poet" (1918) came as an attempt to reconcile Futurist individualism with the collective demands of the moment. In the poem, Mayakovsky positioned the Futurist poet as a technician of language. He compared the Futurist poets to woodworkers--"Aren't we woodworkers?/ we work the oaks of people's heads"-- and fishermen-- "but the work of the poet venerable even more/ is to catch living people not fish." The poet uses his technical knowledge to create works that captivate and convince them of the poem's ideological content. Mayakovsky posed the question, "who is higher— the poet,/ or the technician who/ leads people to material gain?/ Both."⁷⁶ According to this model the Futurist poet was not a bourgeois individual, as they were accused of being by Proletkultists, but a worker among workers. Mayakovsky even attempted to distance himself and the Futurist poets from their past works, likely those he saw as not directly contributing to the revolutionary cause. "Let's separate ourselves from verbal storms/ with a jetty./ to business!"⁷⁷ At the same time however, the Futurist poet was the type of worker that would lead the masses with their technical command of language and poetic form. In this sense, Mayakovsky preserved the leadership

⁷⁶ Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Poet Rabochim," in *Mayakovsky V. V. Polnoe sobranii sochinenii* (Moscow: Gorky Institute of World Literature, 1961), 2:[Page #], previously published in *Iskusstva kommuna* (Moscow), 1918, [https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/%D0%9F%D0%BE%D1%8D%D1%82_%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%87%D0%B8%D0%B9_\(%D0%9C%D0%B0%D1%8F%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9\)](https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/%D0%9F%D0%BE%D1%8D%D1%82_%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%87%D0%B8%D0%B9_(%D0%9C%D0%B0%D1%8F%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9)).

⁷⁷ Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Poet Rabochim," in *Mayakovsky V. V.*

position of the Futurist poet at the same time that he attempted to reconcile Futurism with the collective demands of his moment.

However, with the end of the Civil War, the increased scrutiny of Party leaders like Lenin and Trotsky caused Mayakovsky's notion of the poet-vanguard to become obsolete. Lenin received Mayakovsky's poem *150,000,000* in 1921 with outright contempt for the Futurist poet, and was similarly dismissive towards the Russian avant-garde as a whole. In 1920, the Party, less occupied with fighting the Civil War, turned its attention to matters of cultural policy. The Futurists were condemned in a 1920 Central Committee decree for instilling the workers with "absurd, perverse tastes."⁷⁸ The Futurists, now condemned by the Party's highest body, could no longer position themselves as a cultural vanguard. Instead, as Halima Stephan points out in her book on the Left Front of the Arts, the Futurist poets positioned themselves as poet-specialists in service of the Revolution.⁷⁹

Unlike *The Art of the Commune*, the first Futurist journal after the Party's increased focus on cultural policy, LEF, was founded on an apologetic note. In a 1923 LEF editorial statement, "Whom Does LEF Wrangle With," the members of LEF declared, "*We will purge our old 'we': of all those who try to turn the revolution in art— which is part of the October mandate— into a sort of Oscar-Wildean self indulgence in aesthetics for aesthetics sake.*"⁸⁰ They were concerned with purging themselves of empty aesthetic concerns that had no direct application to

⁷⁸ Central Committee, "O Proletkultax" [On the Proletkults], *Pravda* (Moscow), December 1, 1920, 1, pdf.

⁷⁹ Stephan, *Lef and the Left Front*, 78.

⁸⁰ LEF, "Whom does LEF Wrangle With?," in *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestos, 1912-1928*, ed. Anna M. Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988), 197.

serving the revolution. They addressed the Futurist poets in particular: “By your contribution to today, show that your outburst is not the desperate howl of a suffocating intelligentsia, but a battle— working shoulder to shoulder with all the people, and who strive toward the victory of the commune.”⁸¹ LEF thus acknowledged the critique of Futurism by Proletkult and the Party, and aimed to present a form of Futurism that could contribute more meaningfully to the revolutionary cause. Mayakovsky’s poet-vanguard of “Order of the Day to the Army of Arts” and “Open Letter to the Workers” gave way to the poet-specialist, which was closer to the poet in “Worker Poet”. Rather than leading the masses in a futurist march, the LEF poet would contribute to the revolutionary cause as a center of technical knowledge in a broader system of cultural production.

Mayakovsky and the Futurists of *The Futurist Gazette* and *The Art of the Commune* were in some ways the “desperate howl of the intelligentsia,” that the theorists of LEF sought to correct. They were, after all, members of the intelligentsia attempting to find a place for their aesthetic program in the alien and often hostile environment of Marxist-Leninist ideology and Bolshevism, without previous sources of funding and support. Despite these difficulties, they proved to be highly adaptable and intrepid in their argument for the superiority of Futurist poetry. In his programmatic and poetic texts in *The Futurist Gazette* and *The Art of the Commune*, Mayakovsky created the remarkably rich notion of “the Revolution of the Spirit.” In the poem “Worker Poet” he was able to adapt this notion of poet vanguard to the ideological demands of Proletkult and the Party. In this sense, the Futurists’ activity in the years immediately following the revolution was something more than a “desperate howl.” Nevertheless, Mayakovsky and the

⁸¹ LEF, 198.

Futurists remained at a significant disadvantage. The Party's increased scrutiny in the Soviet cultural realm, and their open condemnation of Futurism in 1920 caused Mayakovsky's notion of the poet-vanguard to become indefensible. In its place, Mayakovsky and the Futurists presented the model of the poet-specialist. Rather than leading the revolution, the poet-specialist would contribute to it indirectly through their technical mastery of the Russian language. In the following chapter, I will outline the notion of the poet-specialist, as exemplified by the agitational-propaganda works of the poet Alexei Kruchenykh.

Chapter Two: Alexei Kruchenykh and Agitational Poetry, 1917-1927

Alexei Kruchenykh, the Futurist poet best known for his invention of *zaum* (“transrational language”) and Mayakovsky’s close colleague from before the 1917 Revolution, also aligned himself with the political agenda of the Bolsheviks. Kruchenykh’s alignment came later, in 1921, at around the same time that Mayakovsky shifted away from asserting the Futurist poet’s role as vanguard of the Revolution towards the more moderate notion of the Futurist poet as specialist. Kruchenykh’s position in the cultural conditions of Soviet Russia was further complicated the highly individualistic nature of his *zaum* poetry, and his apparent indifference towards Bolshevism in the first years of the Revolution. His development from an individualistic *zaum* poet to a poet-specialist in service of the collective revolutionary cause serves as a case study in how the Futurists adapted themselves, both individually and as a movement, to the ideology and cultural objectives of the Communist Party. Among the most pressing of these was the production of agitational-propaganda, and the mass-enlightenment (or ideological indoctrination) of the overwhelmingly illiterate Russian people.

In this chapter, I discuss the relationship between Futurist poetics, the poet-specialist, and agitational-propaganda through a contextualized reading of Kruchenykh’s theoretical texts on agitational propaganda. These texts, “The Left-Agitation of Mayakovsky, Aseev and Tretyakov” (1925) “Devices of Lenin’s Speech,” (1928) and “In Step With the Epoch” (1927) provide insight into how Kruchenykh sought to position himself, and Futurist poetry in general, in the novel conditions of the 1920’s. The image of the agitational-poet that Kruchenykh put forth was well articulated, rooted firmly in Futurist poetics, and deftly positioned in relation to the ideological demands of the Party. While Mayakovsky was no longer able to assert the status

of the Futurists as a poetic vanguard, the beacon of Futurist poetry itself had not yet been extinguished. Despite conceding ground in terms of their status as a movement, the Futurist poets proved to be highly adaptable in advancing the technical and creative superiority of Futurist poetry, as was exemplified by Kruchenykh's shift from *zaum* poet to poet-specialist in the production of agitational-propaganda.

Kruchenykh was a prominent member of the Cubo-Futurist movement in the years leading up to the Revolution. His name appeared alongside Mayakovsky, David Burliuk and Khlebnikov on the Cubo-Futurists' debut 1913 manifesto "Slap in the Face of Public Taste." Kruchenykh's most notable and widely-studied contribution to the Futurist literature of this period was his transrational, *zaum* language. In his 1913 manifesto, "Declaration of the Word as Such", he declared the right of the individual poet to invent their own personal expressive language, "THOUGHT AND SPEECH CANNOT KEEP UP WITH THE EMOTIONS OF SOMEONE IN A STATE OF INSPIRATION therefore the artist is free to express himself not only in common language (concepts)" but also in a "a language which does not have any definite meaning (not frozen), a transrational language [*zaum*]." ⁸² In practice, Kruchenykh's invented, "indefinite," language was characterized by an intentional displacement of conventional phonetics, morphology (roots, prefixes, suffixes), and syntax that often resulted in seemingly nonsensical, and deliberately obscure verses.⁸³ In the most extreme instances, Kruchenykh rejected recognizable language in favor of pure sound compositions, as in the case of the poem

⁸² Alexei Kruchenykh "Declaration of the Word as Such," in *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestos, 1912-1928*, ed. Anna M. Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988) 67.

⁸³ See Gerald Janecek, *Zaum: The Transrational Poetry of Russian Futurism* (San Diego, CA: San Diego State University Press, 1996), 49-69.

“Dyr Bul Schyl.” Despite the idiosyncratic nature of his *zaum* poetry, Kruchenykh considered himself part of the Russian Futurist movement, and often collaborated closely with Cubo-Futurist colleagues. In 1913, he wrote the script for the Futurist opera “Victory over the Sun,” which featured a set designed by Malevich and a score composed by Matyushin and was presented alongside Mayakovsky’s play “Vladimir Mayakovsky: a Tragedy.”

Kruchenykh was not immediately impacted by the October Revolution. While Mayakovsky was busy trumpeting the role of the Futurist poet as vanguard, Kruchenykh was living in the Caucasus, a region which did not fall under Bolshevik rule until 1920-21. The city of Tiflis, one of the region’s metropolitan centers, was home to a thriving arts scene. Artists and poets who had fled the violence of the Civil War enjoyed a degree of creative freedom and peace of mind not present elsewhere in a country ravaged by war and political instability.⁸⁴ As Vladimir Markov writes, “government and military affairs affected the life of ordinary people very little, and for those living in Transcaucasia at the time, the Civil War was a conflict that raged elsewhere.”⁸⁵ Kruchenykh was perhaps the most influential Futurist poet active in Tiflis at the time. Together with the poet Ilya Zdanevich, his brother, Kirill Zdanevich, and Igor Terenteev, Kruchenykh gave lectures, read his verse publicly, and formed the group “41 [degrees]”⁸⁶ Unlike *The Futurist Gazette* and *Art of the Commune*, 41 was primarily dedicated to the expansion of the program of pre-revolutionary Futurism, with a special emphasis Kruchenykh’s *zaum* language. In a manifesto published in 1919, [the authors wrote] “The company 41 unites the left-

⁸⁴ Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History*, 36-37.

⁸⁵ Markov, 338.

⁸⁶ Markov, 338.

bank [avant-garde] futurism and affirms *zaum* as the obligatory form of manifestation in art. The aim of 41 degrees is to make use of all great discoveries by its contributors and to put the world on a new axis.”⁸⁷ While this proclamation implied Futurism’s revolutionary role in that it “put the world on a new axis,” it lacked the explicit link to the October or February revolution present in Mayakovsky’s editorial statements in *Futurist Gazette* and *Art of the Commune*. Instead, Kruchenykh and his colleagues were primarily concerned with the revolution in language and poetic expression that accompanied Futurist verbal experimentation and *zaum*. His conception of revolution remained rooted in the arts and lacked a direct connection to the political revolution that rocked the rest of the country.

Kruchenykh’s Tiflis period, which lasted from 1917 until 1921, was one of his most prolific. He produced around forty booklets of poetry and theoretical writings, many of them a continuation of the pre-revolutionary practice of printing poems alongside, and often incorporating them into, avant-garde illustrations.⁸⁸ The most notable of these books are *Uchites khudogi* (“Learn Art,” 1917), *Malakholiya v kapote* (“Melancholy in a robe,” 1919), and *Lakirovannoe triko* (“Lacquered Tights,” 1919), which mostly contained Kruchenykh’s *zaum* and antiaesthetic poetry.⁸⁹ Kruchenykh also dedicated himself to providing theoretical explanations of his poetry. The first of these theoretical works, *Factura slova* (“The Texture of the Word”) was published in 1919, while the others *Declaration of Transrational Language* and *Shiftology of*

⁸⁷ Markov, 340.

⁸⁸ Markov, 340.

⁸⁹ Markov, 340.

Verse: An Offensive and Educational Treatment appeared as pamphlets in 1921.⁹⁰ Vladimir Markov argues that it was during this period that “Kruchenykh matured theoretically,” and points out that “his later Moscow publications, which look so impressive, are the direct result of his Tiflis years. Afterwards, he only repeated and ruminated on what he created there.”⁹¹ When the Bolsheviks’ occupied the Caucasus in 1920-1921, Kruchenykh’s most prolific period as a zaum poet came to an end as he began to align himself with the political and cultural aims of the Bolshevik party. In August 1921, after a brief period working in the city of Baku, Kruchenykh left the Caucasus for good and settled down permanently in Moscow.

Many of Kruchenykh’s former Futurist colleagues who were active in Moscow at the time of his arrival were already active members or supporters of the Communist party. As he recalled in 1927, these first few weeks were filled with activity as his former colleagues quickly accepted him into the Moscow literary scene;

On August 21, I returned to Moscow, my favorite city, and met almost all my friends. At once I arranged a "visiting" evening, where I was met by many, hitherto unknown, friends. I noisily shared with them my latest thoughts and achievements... The first month after my arrival in Moscow, I performed on various stages almost nightly, even tired.⁹²

⁹⁰ Markov, 340.

⁹¹ Markov, 339.

⁹²Alexei Kruchenykh, "Autobiography of the Wildest One," [Avtobiografiya Dichaichego] 1928, in *K Istorii Russkogo Futurizma: Vospominaniya I Dokumenty S Prilozeniem Deklaracij I Statej A. Kruchenykh a Tarze Statej I. Terenteva I S. Tretjakova* by Alexei Kruchenykh, Igor Terenteyev and Sergei Tretyakov, ed. Nina Guryanova (Moscow: Gileja, 2006), accessed September 29, 2020, <https://ruslit.traumlibrary.net/book/kruchenih-k-istorii/kruchenih-k-istorii.html#s002012>.

Yet while he was quickly accepted into the Moscow literary scene, Kruchenykh could no longer rely on the security and level of artistic freedom he had enjoyed during his Tiflis years. The pressure for Futurist poets like himself to align with the cultural aims of the party had increased significantly after the Party's condemnation of Futurism in Pravda in 1920. Furthermore, the Futurists who declared themselves in support of the regime were now obligated to turn to the Department of Agitational Propaganda (Agitprop) for authorization and material support.

As discussed in chapter one, this pressure led the Futurist and avant-garde journal LEF, which was edited by Mayakovsky, to adopt an apologetic tone. The proposal for LEF contained the following commitments,

--To review the ideology and the practices of the so-called left-art, getting rid of all its individualistic grimaces and developing its valuable sides.

--To conduct persistent agitation among workers of art for the acceptance of the Communist path and ideology.⁹³

The term "Left-art" referred to a wide variety of Russian avant-garde movements that had declared their support of the regime, including the Constructivists, Suprematists, and the Futurists. The objective of LEF, unlike the previous Soviet Futurist journals, was not only to reform the hearts and minds of the Soviet people, but also the "left artists" themselves. Their objective to "conduct persistent agitation among workers of art" implied that there was little room for an indifferent or neutral attitude towards the Communist regime. The imperative to "get rid of individualistic grimaces" of left art and "develop its valuable side" signaled a shift away

⁹³ Quoted in Stephan, *The Left Front of the Arts*, 34.

from bombastic programmatic statements like Mayakovsky's editorial poems towards a utilitarian conception of Futurist art.

In 1923, Kruchenykh became an active member of the Left Front of the Arts.⁹⁴ He was precisely the kind of "left artist" the LEF editorial board sought to reform. Instead of immediately joining the cause like Mayakovsky, Kruchenykh had spent the first years of the Revolution in the relative security of the Tiflis bohemia. His *zaum* poetry had little clear application in fulfilling the cultural objectives of the party, and was based in the highly individualistic right of the poet to overstep "common language"⁹⁵ in favor of an invented, personal language. His *zaum* poetry immediately became a source of controversy among LEF members. They faced the task of reconciling the individualism and deliberate obscurantism of Kruchenykh's *zaum* with the clear cut collectivist ideology of the Party. The Formalist critic Grigory Vinokur and the constructivist critic Boris Arvatov published essays on *zaum* poetry, its utilitarian value and the role of the Futurist poet as linguistic specialist.

Vinokur posited *zaum*'s utility in creating names for consumer goods, such as cigarettes.⁹⁶ Arvatov downplayed the individualism of *zaum* by arguing that the new language could be created through manipulating the sonic and formal aspects of language, but that this process took place on the level of society and the collective, rather than the individual poet. He pointed to the language of children, naming conventions, and the tongues of religious sectarians as examples of

⁹⁴ Markov, *Russian Futurism: a History*, 366.

⁹⁵ Kruchenykh, "Declaration of the Word as Such," in *Russian Futurism through*, 67.

⁹⁶ Georgi Vinokur, "The Futurists-- Constructors of Language," 1923, in *The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader*, ed. Lucy Burke, Tony Crowley, and Alan Girvin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 362-373.

“transrational” speech.⁹⁷ For the broader process of language creation in society he coined the term “compositional language creation,” which he saw as renewing and expanding established, “communicative language.” He wrote, “Compositional language creation is the unconscious experimental laboratory of communicative language creation. Consequently, poetry is also such a laboratory.”⁹⁸ By presenting Futurist poetry as a laboratory, Arvatov positioned the Futurist poets as functional elements within the broader Soviet collective. Kruchenykh’s transrational language was more than the “individual grimace” of an eccentric poet. It was, in Arvatov’s opinion, the technical experimentation of a poet-specialist that contained the potential of expanding Russian “communicative language” as a whole. Arvatov did not stop at the naming of consumer goods, but saw the Futurist’s linguistic laboratory as anticipating the deliberate engineering of language according to the demands of “the sociolinguistic process of production.”⁹⁹ Despite Arvatov and Vinokur’s efforts to justify the social value of transrational language, Kruchenykh’s *zaum* poetry appeared only rarely on LEF’s pages, signaling the editorial board’s continued hesitance to present Futurist poetry in its most eccentric manifestation.¹⁰⁰

The most notable development in Kruchenykh’s writing to emerge from his alignment with Left Front of the Arts, however, were not his theoretical texts on *zaum*, which he continued to produce prodigiously, but a number of explicitly political texts in support of LEF’s ideological platform. The journal LEF was the mouthpiece of the Left Front of Arts, a group of poets and

⁹⁷ Arvatov, “Language Creation,” 1923, in *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestos, 1912-1928*, ed. Anna M. Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988) 219-220.

⁹⁸ Arvatov, “Language Creation,” 226.

⁹⁹ Arvatov, 231.

¹⁰⁰ Markov, *Russian Futurism: a History*, 367.

artists, aimed to create a “unified front” of “left artists” artists and poets that would “fight for the integration of a new culture.”¹⁰¹ As with *The Art of the Commune*, professionalism was a core component of the Left Front of Arts’ platform. This was augmented by the economic liberalization of the NEP period, during which the Party “sought the help of bourgeois specialists to revive Russian industry.”¹⁰² The Futurists, who were already predisposed towards a technical rather than aesthetic approach to art, sought to present themselves as art-specialists. In regards to the Futurists poets, “within the socialist division of labor, a poet would act as a language specialist working toward greater effectiveness in all areas of verbal communication.”¹⁰³ Kruchenykh’s texts on agitational-propaganda were deeply informed by this notion of the poet as specialist, and emerged from his obligation to contribute to the “unified front” of LEF.

In a 1923 editorial, “Our Linguistic Work,” published in the first edition of LEF, Mayakovsky and Brik issued a set of tasks to the Futurist and left poets of Left Front of the Arts. “All this work,” they wrote, “*for us is not an aesthetic end in itself, but a workshop for the best expression of the facts of the contemporary era.*”¹⁰⁴ The LEF poets, in other words, were technicians of language, who would respond to the representational demands of the contemporary moment. Kruchenykh’s task was to “Experiment with the use of jargon phonetics to give form to antireligious and political themes.”¹⁰⁵ While determining the precise role played

¹⁰¹ N. Aseyev et. al. “What Does Lef Fight For,” 1923, in *Russian Futurism through*, 194.

¹⁰² Stephan, *Lef and the Left Front*, 63.

¹⁰³ Stephan, *Lef and the Left Front*, 78.

¹⁰⁴ Osip Brik and Vladimir Mayakovsky, “Our Linguistic Work,” 1923, in *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestos, 1912-1928*, ed. Anna M. Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988) 202.

¹⁰⁵ Brik and Mayakovsky, “Our Linguistic Work,” 202.

by jargon phonetics in Kruchenykh's writing would require an extensive formal analysis, his texts "LEF Agitation" and "Devices of Lenin's Speech," demonstrate that he took his role as a poet-specialist seriously. He was no longer an individual poet creating an individual language, but a technician actively contributing to the Bolshevik government's production of agitational-propaganda.

The idea of "agitational-propaganda," was of great importance to the Bolsheviks' revolutionary agenda. As historian Peter Kenez points out in his study of Soviet propaganda, 'propaganda' in its contemporary usage has "become a pejorative term in Western Society"-- an ideological cudgel used against opponents who "achieve their success by underhanded methods of persuasion, that is, propaganda."¹⁰⁶ For the Bolsheviks, the term lacked this negative connotation. Instead, they understood propaganda as a means of ideological education; "a synonym for propaganda in early Soviet parlance was "political education work," or, according to the contemporary abbreviation, *politprosvetrabota*."¹⁰⁷ The importance of propaganda as an educational tool lay at the core of the Bolsheviks' worldview. Lenin claimed in his 1902 treatise, *What is to be Done?*, that the proletariat was incapable of achieving revolutionary class-consciousness on its own. Instead, "the theory of socialism... grew out of the philosophical, historical and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals."¹⁰⁸ The socialist ideas on which the young Soviet state was to be founded emerged from the propertied, intellectual class. Propaganda represented the transference of these

¹⁰⁶ Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 2.

¹⁰⁷ Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, 8.

¹⁰⁸ Kenez, 6.

ideas, which the Bolsheviks considered to be ‘scientific’ truths, from their educated progenitors to the working class and peasants.

The Bolsheviks drew a further theoretical distinction between “agitation” and “propaganda.”¹⁰⁹ According to the 19th c. Marxist theoretician, Gyorgi Plekhanov, “a propagandist presents many ideas to one or a few persons; the agitator presents only one or a few ideas, but he presents them to a mass of people.”¹¹⁰ The propagandists involved themselves in fully educating a small group of individuals in the tenets of Marxism, while the agitator sacrificed depth of education for breadth and strength of impact. Lenin wrote that the agitator “will direct his efforts to presenting a single idea to the masses, e.g. the senselessness of the contradiction between the increase of wealth and the increase of poverty; he will strive *to* rouse discontent and indignation among the masses against this crying injustice, leaving a more complete explanation of this contradiction to the propagandist.”¹¹¹ The Bolsheviks’ understanding of agitational propaganda was further colored by an association of agitation with speech, and propaganda with writing.

Anatoly Lunacharsky, valued the arts as a resource to be drawn upon in the production of agitational-propaganda. In his essay “Art and Revolution,” published in 1920, he maintained Plekhanov’s distinction between propaganda and agitation, and argued that the revolutionary role of artists lay in their capacity to produce agitational works. He wrote: “Don’t we know that the artistic public speaker or journalist finds his way to the people’s hearts more quickly than those

¹⁰⁹ Kenez, 6.

¹¹⁰ Kenez, 7.

¹¹¹ Kenez, 7.

lacking in artistic strength?”¹¹² In other words, the role of the artist was to make palatable and even exciting ideas that the majority of Russians lacked either the interest or educational background to access. He argued that “the Communist Party, from this point of view, should arm itself with all the organs of art, which in this way will prove itself to be of great use to agitation.”¹¹³ On their own, the ideas being disseminated by the party were understood to be not compelling enough; they needed instead to be enhanced in the hands of a skilled propaganda poet or artist. Naturally, the content of this propaganda was determined entirely by the political objectives of the Party. Ideological control lay in the hands of the Agitprop section of the Party’s Central Committee, while Glavpolitvet, a section of Narkompros, controlled the schools and reading rooms established across the Soviet Union as part of a campaign to increase literacy and indoctrinate the masses in the precepts of Marxist-Leninism.¹¹⁴

The avant-garde’s first extensive participation in the production of propaganda took place in 1918, when Lenin himself made a rare intervention in the cultural realm to introduce his plan for “Monumental Propaganda”. This plan, as recalled by Lunacharskii, had two primary objectives. The first was “to decorate buildings, fences, etc. places where posters usually appear, with large revolutionary inscriptions.”¹¹⁵ The second “related to the installation of monuments to

¹¹² Anatoly Lunacharsky, “Revolution and Art,” 1922, in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism*, ed. John E. Bowlt, trans. John E. Bowlt (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), 192.

¹¹³ Lunacharsky, “Revolution and Art” 192.

¹¹⁴ David Brandenburger, “The Propaganda State’s First Decade.” *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Political Indoctrination, and Stalinist Terror, 1928-1930*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 12.

¹¹⁵ Anatoly Lunacharsky, “Lenin i iskusstvo. vospominaniya” [Lenin and Art. Recollections] in *Estetika, literaturnaya kritika. Ctati, doklady, rechi (1903-1928)*, ed. U. A. Guralnik and I. S. Chernoutsan, vol. 7, *Sobranie sochineniya* (Moscow: Gorky Institute of World Literature, 1967). <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-7/lenin-i-iskusstvo-vospominania/>

the great revolutionaries on an extremely large scale, temporary monuments made of plaster, both in St. Petersburg and in Moscow.”¹¹⁶ The plan saw widespread participation from notable avant-gardists including Vladimir Tatlin, who was put in charge of carrying out Lenin’s plan. Yet due to lack of funding, many of the large monuments that appeared in Kiev, Moscow, and St. Petersburg, which were constructed from low-quality material, quickly decayed. The success of Lenin’s plan is questionable in its short-term impact as it was never realized on the scale initially intended by Lenin. However, the idea that underpinned Lenin’s plan-- the utilitarian value of art as propaganda-- continued to inform the Bolshevik attitude towards art. It also continued to inform artists and poets, including those of the Futurist persuasion who, in an effort to create the definitive communist art, put their talents in the service of the revolution and the new ideology.

Before Kruchenykh arrived in Moscow, Mayakovsky actively embraced the role of poet as propagandist. From 1918 until his suicide in 1930, Mayakovsky produced an impressive array of propagandistic works. One of the most well-known of these poems, “Komsomol Song” (1924), included a stanza celebrating the immortality of Lenin, “Lenin--/ lived, Lenin--/ lives,/ Lenin will always live,” which became a popular slogan of Soviet propaganda.¹¹⁷ He also illustrated and wrote slogans for ROSTA windows: four-paneled propaganda posters distributed by the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA) during the Civil War and NEP period.

Mayakovsky resembled the poet-specialist the most in his production of slogans for the state-run store Masel’prom. He deployed his formidable skill as a poet to create jingle-like poems advertising inane consumer goods such as pasta, chocolate and galoshes, each of which

¹¹⁶ Lunacharsky, “Lenin i iskusstva”.

¹¹⁷ Vladimir Mayakovsky, “Komsomol Song,” 1924, trans. Dorian Rotenburg in *Vladimir Mayakovsky: Selected Verse*, 100-103.

ended in the slogan “Nowhere else except in Mosselprom.”¹¹⁸ These slogans were often accompanied by illustrations by the constructivist artist Rodchenko. Mayakovsky recalled later, “In spite of poetic catcalls I regard “Nowhere except in Mosselprom” as poetry of the very highest quality.”¹¹⁹ Other Futurists and avant-gardists, including visual artists, participated in the production of agitational propaganda. During the Civil War, Kazimir Malevich, Mayakovsky and El Litzitsky were commissioned to decorate the agit-trains that distributed propaganda and transported agitators around the countryside.

Despite his late arrival to the pro-communist art scene, Kruchenykh proved to be receptive, albeit for mostly pragmatic reasons, to the role of artist-propagandist. In his autobiography, Kruchenykh only hints at his work for LEF and Agitprop. Instead of divulging his motivation or thoughts regarding his work in the 20’s, he wrote, simply, “Once again-- in Moscow-- my lit-work bubbled up. As for what was boiling and how it boiled-- take a look in the books from 21’ until the present.”¹²⁰ Kruchenykh’s works of this period contain important insights into how Kruchenykh adapted himself to the novel role of the poet-specialist. As the Left Front of Arts attempted to position itself as a unified front of artists in service of the state, Kruchenykh was obligated to adopt its rhetoric and present himself as a member of a unified movement. In *Lef- Agitation of Mayakovsky, Aseev and Tretyakov*, published in 1925 by the All-Russian Union of Poets, Kruchenykh presented the agit-poems of the LEF Futurists

¹¹⁸ See Mayakovsky Vladimir, *Mayakovsky V. V. [Reklama]*, in *Agitctikhi; Agitpoemy; Ctikhi detyam 1920-30*, ed. V. Katyana, vol. 5, *Mayakovsky V. V. Sobranie sochinenii* (St. Petersburg: Khudozhestvennaya Literatura, 1940), 5: <http://feb-web.ru/feb/mayakovsky/texts/mp0/mp5/mp5-343-.htm>.

¹¹⁹ Mayakovsky, *I Myself*, 41.

¹²⁰ Kruchenykh, “Автобиография” in *К истории русского футуризма*.

Mayakovsky, Nikolai Aseev and Sergey Tretyakov as valuable assets in the Bolshevik project of mass education.

The primary objective of LEF agitational poetry, Kruchenykh argued, was to influence the largest number of listeners possible. Unlike other literary forms, agitation did cater to an audience with a specific class or educational background. Instead, the ideal agitational was meant to capture “all people, the whole country, and then the whole world” in the “sphere of its influence.”¹²¹ This was only possible if two conditions were fulfilled. First, agit-poetry needed to be “very popular, accessible in meaning, language, and form.”¹²² This condition may be surprising, in light of the widespread claim from Proletkult and the Party that Futurist poetry, especially Kruchenykh’s, was unintelligible and inaccessible to the masses of workers. Kruchenykh responded to this criticism by including poems by Aseev, Mayakovsky and Tretyakov that he thought exemplified popular accessibility of Futurist poetry. He provided further evidence of the Futurists popularity by citing a passage from Y. Shafir’s book “The Newspaper and the Village”. In the passage Shafir, an educated party member, reads through a newspaper with a group of peasants. The peasants fail to understand what Shafir reads to them. The notable exception to this is an anti-religious poem by Mayakovsky, “Peasants,/ for your own

¹²¹ Kruchenykh uses the word *захватить*, meaning to conquer or to seize, to describe how agit-prop would act on the masses, indicating that the ‘sphere of influence’ was imposed from above by the Lef poets and the Party. “Агитка на политические темы... стремится захватить ‘в сферу своего влияния,’ весь народ, всю страну, а то и весь мир” Alexei Kruchenykh, *Lef Agitation of Mayakovsky, Aseev and Tretyakov* [ЛЕФ агитки Маяковского Асеева Третьякова] (Moscow: All-Russian Union of Poets, 1925), 3.

¹²² That is, “агитка должен быть...очень популярной, общественной по мысли и языку, по форме.” Kruchenykh, *Lef Agitation*, 3.

fortune's sake/ understand,/ it's not about/ the ritual.”¹²³ That Mayakovsky alone was appealing to the peasants reinforced Kruchenykh's presentation of Futurist poetry as widely accessible and popular among the masses. Shafir's anecdote also served as a justification of the utilitarian value of Futurist agitational work. The Bolsheviks were widely unpopular among the peasants. Any means of presenting their ideology to the peasants in a way that was both accessible and enjoyable would have been well-received.

The poem's success lay in Mayakovsky's technical mastery of language, and his ability to present Party ideology in a compelling and memorable way. The popularity of Mayakovsky's poem among the peasants, Kruchenykh argued, was due to Mayakovsky's “renewal” and “refreshing” of the form of a Krylovian fable, which would have been familiar and accessible to a peasant audience, with “modern poetic technique and communist ideology.”¹²⁴ Mayakovsky was able to convey the anti-religious ideological content of the poem by taking old forms and making them new again through Futurist technique.

In this sense, Mayakovsky's poems fulfilled Kruchenykh's second condition for agitational-propaganda, that of being “very artistic and original.”¹²⁵ Even agit-poems which were easily understood by the masses wouldn't necessarily achieve their aim of impressing ideological content in the minds of their readers if the form in which this content was presented were forgettable or stale. Kruchenykh identified his conception of “very artistic and original” with the

¹²³ The title of Mayakovsky's poem is much catchier in the original Russian and resembles a rhyming idiom that a peasant might have repeated to their children: “Крестьяне,/ собственной выгоды ради/ поймите/ дело не в обряде” Kruchenykh, *Lef Agitation*, 4.

¹²⁴ Kruchenykh, *Lef Agitation*, 9.

¹²⁵ This condition was written in straightforward Russian which bore little resemblance to the language of Kruchenykh's freewheeling *zaum* manifestos, simply: “очень художественной и оригинальной” Kruchenykh, *Lef Agitation*, 9.

ability of the poem to impress itself in the mind of its reader or listener. The Futurist poet would act as a specialist in the formal aspect of agitational-propaganda, experimenting with their work on the formal and sonic quality of language to create the largest impact on the reader possible. In making this argument, Kruchenykh drew heavily on a passage from an article by Osip Brik on advertising poetry. In this sense, Kruchenykh's analysis of LEF agitational-propaganda works was situated in the broader pool of technical analysis written by LEF poets and theoreticians, and reflected the platform of the Left Front of the Arts as a whole.

According to Brik, the agit-poet was a professional who possessed a technical understanding of what Brik termed, the "triple connection of words." He wrote, "Poetry is striking and well recalled. These qualities are indispensable for agitation and advertising... It is easier to recall poetry than prose. The reason-- the triple connection of words (meaning, rhythm, sound)."¹²⁶ It was only the technically proficient, and presumably Futurist, poet who possessed the skill to produce quality agitation, and successfully manipulate meaning, rhythm and sound to create a lasting impression in the mind of the reader. Brik continued:

The effect of a good advertising poem is enormous. It is compulsive and clingy. It is difficult to forget, if one gets sick of it. But this is on the condition that it is good, technically good. Bad advertising poems are simply not memorable, do not grab the attention, and do not advertise. This is the reason that writing good ad-poems is more difficult than lyrical poems on the theme of "roses and dreams." This is the reason many glorified lyric-poets are unable to manage the most simple agitational or advertising tasks.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Osip Brik, quoted in Kruchenykh, *Lef Agitation*, 11.

¹²⁷ Kruchenykh, 12.

In this instance, the poet as specialist closely resembled the capitalist ad-man, manufacturing slogans to fulfill the demands of their sponsor, the state. The role of the poet was to provide a formal vessel, made memorable or “clingy” by rhythm and sound, in order to transfer and impress ideological content in the minds of their listeners or readers. Even Lenin expressed his begrudging approval of Mayakovsky’s agitational poem “Izvestiia,” noting that its political content was “perfectly correct.”¹²⁸ Kruchenykh pointed out that, were it not for Mayakovsky’s technical ability, Lenin would not have noticed the poem or its political contents in the first place.

In fact, as Kruchenykh went on to argue in his 1925 book *Devices of Lenin’s Speech*, even Lenin’s speech was augmented by his command of the formal aspect of language. *Devices of Lenin’s Speech* emerged out of a broader effort among Formalist and avant-garde critics to apply the Formalist methodology to an analysis of Lenin’s speech. Published as a separate book in 1925, it followed a series of essays featured in LEF journal (1924) by Formalist critics including Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum, Yuri Tynyanov, Boris Tomashevsky, Lev Yakubinsky, and Boris Kazansky. After Lenin’s death in 1924, the critics of the Left Front of Arts sought to appropriate Lenin’s legacy and create a narrative of the Soviet leader that was favorable to their own political and cultural agenda.

Kruchenykh opened *Devices of Lenin’s Speech* with a dichotomy between specialists of literature who were primarily interested in the “word as such,” and the subject of his essay, Vladimir Lenin, who was interested in “action as such.”¹²⁹ Kruchenykh reconciled this

¹²⁸ Kruchenykh, 9.

¹²⁹ Alexei Kruchenykh, *Priemi Leninskoi Rech*, 3rd ed. (Moscow: Vserossiskii Soyuz Poetov, 1928), 6, <https://ruslit.traumlibrary.net/fx/kruchenih-rech-lenina.html>.

dichotomy by demonstrating that even Lenin's speech, which was geared towards action, was augmented by Lenin's strong grasp of formal technique. He referred to Lenin's statement, "it is necessary to be able to adapt schemes to life, and not to repeat the meaningless words they have become."¹³⁰ Even in political discourse, words lose their meaning through repeated usage, to the point where they no longer accurately reflect reality. Because of this, Kruchenykh concluded, "every leader updates the dictionary. And behind Lenin there has accumulated a huge number of words that he has created, perhaps on the fly, but nevertheless so that they are embedded in the language and can enter the dictionary."¹³¹ In other words, Lenin was as much a "word-creator" as the Futurist poets were. Kruchenykh listed a number of Lenin's neologisms, including "smychka [смычка]" or "linkage," and "bestavar'e [бестоварье]" or "comradeless". In addition to Lenin's neologisms, he also identified eleven formal devices of Lenin's speech. Among these were Lenin's "clarity," "reduction of style," and "angularity."¹³² These devices, like Lenin's neologisms, prevented the Party leader's rhetoric from becoming stale and out of sync with reality.

By undertaking a formal analysis of Lenin's speech, Kruchenykh dressed familiar Formalist and Futurist themes, such as "word creation" and formal device, in a politically legitimizing garb. On the one hand, by presenting Lenin as an adept linguistic specialist, Kruchenykh sought to legitimize Futurist formal experimentation in general, and to justify the Futurist poets' role as specialists in agitational-propaganda in particular. If even Lenin used

¹³⁰ Kruchenykh, *Priemi Leninskoi*, 8.

¹³¹ Kruchenykh, *Priemi Leninskoi*, 8.

¹³² Kruchenykh, *Priemi Leninskoi*, 8-9, 18, 42.

neologisms and formal devices to augment his political speech, then the Futurists were justified in emphasizing the formal presentation of political ideology. On the other hand, Kruchenykh's *Devices* functioned as an implicit defense of the style of formal literary analysis with which he approached Lenin's speech. Finally, Kruchenykh and the Formalist scholars who produced formal analyses of Lenin's speech would have been well aware of Lenin's outspoken criticism of Futurism. In this sense, Kruchenykh was not only legitimizing Futurism in the eyes of the Party, but actively attempting to transform Lenin's legacy from viciously anti-futurist to that of a skilled semi-Futurist rhetorician.

Kruchenykh continued this bid for legitimacy in his 1927 essay "In Step with the Epoch (The Futurists and October)." Instead of drawing on contemporary material to argue for the continued relevance of Futurism, Kruchenykh highlighted the Futurists' historical support of the October Revolution. According to Kruchenykh, the pre-revolutionary Futurists were revolutionaries, in tune with the atmosphere of "social uprising" between 1911 and 1917. He argued, "The battle front of the Futurists for new art was from the very beginning one of the sites of pressure of social forces on the stronghold of autocracy, on the landlord-capitalist state with all its add-ons, with its religion and art."¹³³ The October Revolution demonstrated definitively "who was with who." The Futurists, who were already engaged in a battle against the status-quo, were natural supporters of the October Revolution: "The Futurists lived according to their own

¹³³ Alexei Kruchenykh, "V nogu s epoku (Futuristi i Oktyabr'," in *K Istorii Russkogo Futurizma: Vospominaniya i Dokumenty s Prilozheniem Deklaracij i Statej A. Krucenykh a Tarze Statej I. Terenteva i S. Tretjakova*, by Aleksej Eliseevič Kručenykh, ed. Nina Guryanova (Moskva: Gileja, 2006), accessed September 29, 2020, <https://ruslit.traumlibrary.net/book/kruchenih-k-istorii/kruchenih-k-istorii.html#s002012>.

wool and, naturally, ended up in the camp of the revolution.”¹³⁴ Kamensky, Mayakovsky and Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh pointed out, immediately became outspoken supporters of the revolution. He cited a rumor among the intelligentsia, recounted by Kamensky that “the Bolsheviks will stay in power for ‘no more than two weeks’. The fact that the ‘futurists were the first to accept soviet power’ shocked many among us. These many now looked at us with undisguised horror and disgust, as at wild madmen who had ‘no more than two weeks left to live’ with the Bolsheviks.”¹³⁵ This historical narrative allowed Kruchenykh to present Futurism as a natural ally of Bolshevism and to insert himself into the historical lineage of Mayakovsky and *The Art of the Commune*.

Unlike Mayakovsky, however, Kruchenykh did not immediately declare his support of the Revolution. While Mayakovsky was advancing his idea of the poet-vanguard in *The Futurist Gazette* and *The Art of the Commune*, Kruchenykh was busy expanding on his theory of *zaum* with the 41 degrees group in Tiflis. Kruchenykh joined Mayakovsky and the pro-communist Futurists in Moscow in 1920, just as their claim on being the cultural vanguard of the Revolution was rendered untenable by the Party’s increased attention to cultural policy and condemnation of futurism. Kruchenykh, perhaps due to his lack of any pre-existing political convictions, quickly adapted to the new role of the “poet-specialist”. In his book on LEF agitational poetry, Kruchenykh presented the Futurist poet as someone closely resembling a western ad-man, deploying their knowledge of sound and form to create easily remembered slogans. Through analyzing Lenin’s speech, he argued for the importance of the formal presentation of ideological

¹³⁴ Kruchenykh, “V nogu”.

¹³⁵ Kruchenykh, “V nogu”.

content, as exemplified by Lenin's practice of coining neologisms and using inventive devices to respond to the political demands of the moment. Finally, Kruchenykh sought to secure the historical legacy of Futurism as a revolutionary movement in his 1927 text, "In Step with the Epoch." Despite the shift away from poet-vanguard to poet-specialist, Kruchenykh still asserted the superiority of Futurist formal experimentation in his texts on agitational propaganda, often in more intelligible terms than Mayakovsky's earlier articulation of the "Revolution of the Spirit". In this sense, while they conceded a significant amount of ground in terms Futurism's status as a movement, both Mayakovsky and Kruchenykh proved remarkably intrepid and highly adaptable in their defense of Futurist poetics with its seemingly limitless potential for making the world anew and liberating human creativity from the shackles of the past.

Futurism and the Party, 1917-1923

We stepped into the Revolution while Futurism fell into it.

-Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*

Upon receiving Mayakovsky's poem *150,000,000* in 1921, the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars of the Russian SFSR and the leader of the Communist Party, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, scribbled a note to the Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoli Lunacharsky. "Nonsense, stupid, superfluous stupidity and tendentiousness!" he wrote, "in my opinion print only 1 out of 10 of such things and no more than 1,500 copies for libraries and cranks."¹³⁶ The violent reaction of the most powerful figure in the party against Mayakovsky's attempt to write "the poem of revolution" reflected the precarious position of the Futurists in post-revolutionary Russia. The Futurists depended entirely on the Party for financial and material support, and a condemnation or expression of approval from a high ranking party member often drastically altered their status as revolutionary poets and artists. In order to gain the Party's approval, the Futurists needed to prove their compatibility with Bolshevik Marxism, and demonstrate their ability to practically contribute to the revolutionary cause. In addition to this, they were vulnerable to sudden shifts in the Party's cultural policy, as it adjusted to a rapidly changing set of historical circumstances and changes in leadership. Despite Mayakovsky and Kruchenykh's best efforts to prove otherwise, the Futurists' formal revolution and doctrine of historical rupture were ultimately alien to the theoretical framework of Bolshevik Marxism. In this chapter, I argue

¹³⁶ Qtd in Jangfeldt, *Mayakvoskij and Futurism*, 106.

that the Futurists' failure to fully align themselves with the Bolshevik Party was rooted in their incompatibility with the Bolshevik historical doctrine, and their untenable claim on the status of cultural vanguard. In early Soviet Russia, Party support was critical for the success of a cultural movement like Futurism. The Bolsheviks' shifting and ultimately dismissive attitude towards the Futurists resulted in the failure of Mayakovsky and Kruchenykh to establish Futurism as the definitive socialist art.

In what follows, I trace the theoretical reception of Futurism and Futurist poetry in the writings of the Party leaders Anatoli Lunacharsky, Leon Trotsky, and Vladimir Lenin, in relation to the Bolshevik cultural policy the Civil War and early NEP period, and Marxist-Leninist doctrine. I begin with a brief exposition of the origins of the Bolshevik historical doctrine and the Party vanguard in the writings of Georgi Plekhanov and Lenin. Next, I examine the tolerant reception of Futurism by Lunacharsky in the context of the Civil War, and the Party's attempt to solidify their hold on power through an emphasis on the historical legitimacy of the October Revolution. Finally, I look at the reception of Futurism by Lenin and Trotsky in the context of the New Economic Policy and Lenin's policy of cultural revolution.

The roots of the Bolshevik historical doctrine lay in the Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov's theory of dialectical materialism. Plekhanov presented his dialectic as a "method of inquiry," that examined the world as an interrelated whole, and that sought out and identified internal contradictions which would inevitably lead to sudden and irreversible changes.¹³⁷ Plekhanov, drawing on Marx, understood this dialectic as taking place almost exclusively in "the

¹³⁷ Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, the Golden Age, the Breakdown*, trans. Paul S. Falla (New York: W. W. Norton & company, 2008), 337.

material conditions of life.”¹³⁸ These material conditions determined human intellectual development, and rarely vice versa. As a result, for Plekhanov, intellectual life, political institutions, art, literature and poetry all emerged out of contradictions in economic, social and historical conditions. According to this model, it was not enough for artists and poets like the Futurists to radically alter culture and expect human consciousness to follow suit. Freedom, for Plekhanov, consisted in “understanding the laws of history and taking advantage of them in order to act effectively.”¹³⁹ The proper role of the socialist intellectual was to leverage his or her objective knowledge of historical laws to lead the workers through the necessary historical stages into communism. Vladimir Lenin embraced Plekhanov’s notion of dialectical materialism and positioned it at the heart of Bolshevik Marxism, with the added element of the Party as revolutionary vanguard.¹⁴⁰ Lenin advocated for a vanguard of professional revolutionaries with an impeccable understanding of Marxist theory, who would enlighten the peasants and workers with their true historical role, and lead them through the predetermined historical stages of revolution.¹⁴¹ When the 1917 Revolution arrived, the Bolsheviks saw themselves as the agents of history itself, and the only group with the knowledge and skill to lead Russia into the promised land of communism. Where the Futurists sought freedom in a rupture from history, Lenin and the Bolsheviks gave themselves to it entirely.

¹³⁸ Leszek, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 337.

¹³⁹ Leszek, 337.

¹⁴⁰ Leszek, 386.

¹⁴¹ Leszek, 385-388.

Upon seizing power in 1917, the position of the Bolshevik party was far from secure. As Richard Pipes points out, the events of the October Revolution “were not spontaneous but carefully plotted and staged by a tightly organized conspiracy.”¹⁴² While the Bolsheviks considered themselves to be the historical agents of the proletarian revolution, to much of Russia, their hold on power was seen as illegitimate. They faced the immediate and violent opposition of the White Army and other anti-Bolshevik forces in a Civil War that would wreak havoc on Russia for the first four years of Bolshevik power. In addition to waging a war, the Party faced the task of legitimizing its hold on political power in the eyes of the largely illiterate masses of peasants and workers and in the eyes the intelligentsia, many of whom were ambivalent towards the Bolshevik seizure of power. The precariousness of the Bolsheviks’ position was reflected in their approach to cultural policy.

The party leader in charge of educational and cultural policy at the time was Anatoli Lunacharsky, a Bolshevik who was widely recognized for his fluency in cultural matters. He was familiar with the full expanse of Russian cultural life. In 1913, he penned an essay on Italian Futurism in which he briefly mentioned the Russian Futurists as “dim and absurd reflections” of their Italian progenitors.¹⁴³ Lunacharsky had also been an active member of the *Vpered* faction of the party, and advocated for the faction’s “godbuilding” thesis, according to which the “Bolsheviks should propagate Marxism as an anthropocentric religion whose God was Man,

¹⁴² Richard Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 126.

¹⁴³ See Lunacharsky, “Futurism”

raised to the height of his powers, and whose celebration was the revolution.”¹⁴⁴ He saw in culture and religion an emotional and moral compliment to the scientific Marxism of Plekhanov, writing “religion is enthusiasm and without enthusiasm it is not given to man to create anything.”¹⁴⁵ While Lunacharsky distanced himself from the godbuilding thesis after the revolution, this commitment to cultural production as an emotional compliment to scientific Marxism continued to inform his work as the Commissar of Enlightenment.

As the head of the newly formed People’s Commissariat of Cultural Enlightenment, or Narkompros, Lunacharsky gained control of a vast swath of Russian cultural life, including “the former ministry of education, the state educational committee created by the Provisional Government, and the former Palace Ministry, which controlled the imperial theatres, and the Academy of arts and Royal Palaces.”¹⁴⁶ When the economy was nationalized in 1918 under the policy of War Communism, Lunacharsky’s control of Russian cultural life was transformed into a monopoly. He determined which poets, writers, artists, and artistic organizations had access to critical resources such as printing presses or studio space.

However, while Lunacharsky had exclusive control of material resources, the legitimacy of the party and its cultural administration remained an open question for the duration of the Civil War. The Futurist poet Vasily Kamensky recalled a widespread rumor that proliferated among Russian artists and intellectuals that “the Bolsheviks will stay in power for ‘no more than

¹⁴⁴ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.

¹⁴⁵ Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of*, 4.

¹⁴⁶ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, 11

two weeks.”¹⁴⁷ In order to draw the ambivalent intelligentsia into the Soviet cultural regime and revive Russian cultural life, Lunacharsky adopted a tolerant stance towards a wide range of artistic movements.¹⁴⁸ He adopted the slogan, “Free development to all artistic organizations!”¹⁴⁹ Lunacharsky’s tolerance also emerged from his hesitancy to use governmental authority to prematurely impose a party doctrine on cultural development. “Art is divided up into a large number of directions. The proletariat is only just working out its artistic criteria, and therefore no state authority or any professional union should regard any one of them as belonging to the state; at the same time, however, they should render every assistance to the new searches in art.”¹⁵⁰ Instead, it was in the Party’s interest to step back and allow for Soviet art and literature to develop with a degree of freedom.

This tolerance should not be mistaken for a liberal approach, however. Lunacharsky’s understanding of cultural production was instrumental, in that he still expected artists to contribute to the Party’s program of agitational propaganda. “All fields of art,” he declared, “must be utilized in order to elevate and illustrate clearly our agitational work.”¹⁵¹ Lunacharsky’s tolerance gave an opening to a wide-array of artists, poets and writers to accept the government’s much needed material support and to confer upon the cultural regime a level of prestige and legitimacy. In return, the artists would assist in the mass propaganda campaigns discussed in

¹⁴⁷ Qtd in Kruchenykh, “V nogu c epoku,”

¹⁴⁸ Jangfeldt, *Mayakovskij and Futurism*, 31.

¹⁴⁹ Anatoly Lunacharsky and Yuvenal Slavinsky, “Theses of the Art Section of Narkompros and the Central Committee of the Union of Art Workers Concerning the Basic Question of Art,” in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism*, ed. John E. Bowlt, trans. John E. Bowlt (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), 184-185.

¹⁵⁰ Lunacharsky, “Theses of the Art Section,” 185.

¹⁵¹ Lunacharsky, 185.

chapter one, bring the ideological message of the party to the masses of peasants and workers, mobilize them in the war effort, and ensure that they perceived the Bolsheviks' authority as legitimate.

The Futurists, who had immediately embraced the October Revolution, were ideal candidates for Lunacharsky's construction of his new cultural regime. Despite Narkompros's exclusive control of critical resources, its relationship with the Futurists was initially reciprocal. Halima Stephan points out that "Narkompros regarded the cooperation of the Futurists as important for the revival of Russian cultural life under Soviet auspices. Lunacharsky... realized that the Futurists were the only established group that was expressing pro-revolutionary sentiments and that could therefore help legitimate the Soviet cultural administration."¹⁵² Lunacharsky acknowledged that the Futurists "were the first to come to the aid of the Revolution, and that of all the intellectuals they were the most intimately related and sympathetic to it" and that "they actually in many ways proved themselves to be very good organizers."¹⁵³ Moreover, he saw real potential in the Futurists' experimental art and poetry for the future of Soviet art, and believed that funding conservative artists alone would be the equivalent of "blocking the sun from a young plant," dooming it to death, "thereby crippling the course of the human spirit."¹⁵⁴ By establishing IZO [the Section of Fine Arts], the section of Narkompros that provided an array of futurist and avant-garde artists with material support and published the

¹⁵² Stephan, *Lef and the Left Front*, 4.

¹⁵³ Anatoly Lunacharsky, "Lozhka protivaydiay" [A Spoonful of Medicine], *Isskustva Kommuna*, no. 4 (December 1918): [Page #], accessed October 5, 2020, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-2/lozka-protivoadia/>.

¹⁵⁴ Lunacharsky, "Lozhka".

journal *Art of the Commune* under the editorship of Osip Brik and Nikolai Punin, Lunacharsky helped to legitimize Narkompros, gained the support of the Futurists in the production of agitational-propaganda, and invested in the potential innovations of the Futurists.

Yet despite the fact that he acknowledged the Futurist contributions to the revolutionary cause, significant ideological discrepancies emerged that prevented Lunacharsky from fully embracing the Futurists. In 1918, at the behest of Lenin, Lunacharsky published an intervention under the title of “Spoonful of Antitoxin” in *The Art of the Commune*. In it, he strongly condemned the Futurists’ destructive attitude towards the past, and warned them against attempting to “speak from the position of the government.”¹⁵⁵ “It would be a disaster,” he argued, “if innovative artists finally imagined themselves to be a state art school, figures of officials, even if revolutionary, but dictated from above art.”¹⁵⁶ For Lunacharsky, the Futurists’ attempt to assert their status as a cultural vanguard, as exemplified by Mayakovsky’s editorial poems, was a clear transgression of the role set in place for the Futurists by Narkompros. By feigning to speak from the position of the government, the Futurists placed themselves in open competition with the party for the role of vanguard. Lenin’s hand publishing the intervention reveals that the Party leader may have perceived this competition as a threat to the Party’s status as vanguard. The conciliatory tone of the intervention, however -- “I wish, however, that the alarmed faces of this newspaper did not attach too much importance to this,”¹⁵⁷-- demonstrated

¹⁵⁵ Lunacharsky, “Lozhka”.

¹⁵⁶ Lunacharsky, “Lozhka”.

¹⁵⁷ Lunacharsky, “Lozhka”.

Narkompros's continued reliance on the Futurists for the legitimacy and cultural support they provided, and the tolerance of Lunacharsky's cultural policy.

Lunacharsky was especially critical of the Futurist's rejection of the literature and art of the past. He criticized the Futurist's historical doctrine, and presented his own distinctly Marxist defense of past art, in a speech delivered to IZO in 1919, and later published in *Art of the Commune*. Lunacharsky began, "two contrasts are usually made... when the question of old and new art arises. They [the Futurists] contrast the old, bourgeois art, with the new, proletarian art; on the other, they contrast all schools that have hitherto existed with futurism; and in this opposition they see a parallelism."¹⁵⁸ The Futurists believed that in order for a revolutionary culture to be constructed, the remains of the past that impeded the free development of thought and creative expression, needed to be destroyed. This, Lunacharsky pointed out, was a historical fallacy. In response to the Futurist's claim, he presented a history of cultural development that demonstrated his command of dialectical material analysis.

Lunacharsky rooted artistic trends in their material conditions, and saw art as developing according to a continuous historical process. For example, he attributed the "the great decline in art" near the end of the 19th century to the "capitalist system's heyday."¹⁵⁹ Futurism itself had emerged from the class struggle of the early 20th century, as the "the bourgeoisies sought to inject fresh juices into its rotten and outdated culture."¹⁶⁰ Yet while the conditions of capitalism

¹⁵⁸ Anatoly Lunacharsky, "Insident. Rech' Lunacharskogo (gazetnii otchet)" [Incident. Lunacharsky's Speech (Newspaper Report)], *Iskusstvo Kommuna*, no. 5 (November 5, 1918), accessed October 6, 2020, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/russkoe-sovetskoe-iskusstvo/prilozenie-1-k-state-iskusstvo/>.

¹⁵⁹ Lunacharsky, "Rech'".

¹⁶⁰ Lunacharsky, "Rech'".

had led to a decay in art, Lunacharsky pointed out, “Not all that is bourgeois in art is bad.”¹⁶¹ He referred specifically to the mass and bourgeois art of Egypt, Greece, Ancient Russia, the North of France and Flanders as historical predecessors to the art of the Soviet proletariat. Art was, for Lunacharsky, the product of a continuous process of historical development; it could not simply be set aside and begun anew. Proletarian art would necessarily “be built on the foundation of all our acquisitions from the past.”¹⁶² In the same way that the proletarian revolution was preceded by the bourgeois revolution in the historical dialectic, the art of the proletariat needed to be based on the inheritance of the bourgeois past.

This framing of the party’s political and cultural activities in terms of historical continuity was politically advantageous in the context of the Civil War and the embattled position of the Party. Whereas democratic regimes draw their legitimacy from the principle of popular sovereignty, the Bolsheviks sought to legitimize their power by positioning themselves as the agents of grand historical forces that had necessitated their seizure of power. In 1918, Lenin published a decree titled “On Monuments of the Republic,” in which he called for the removal of all tsarist monuments without historical or artistic value, and for the “mobilization of artistic forces and the organization of a broad competition to develop designs that should commemorate the great days of the Russian Socialist Revolution.”¹⁶³ The monuments were to depict a broad

¹⁶¹ Lunacharsky, “Rech”.

¹⁶² Lunacharsky, “Rech”.

¹⁶³ Vladimir Lenin, Anatoli Lunacharsky, Joseph Stalin, “A pamyatnikax respublika,” 1918.
https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/%D0%94%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%82_%D0%A1%D0%9D%D0%9A_%D0%A0%D0%A1%D0%A4%D0%A1%D0%A0_%D0%BE%D1%82_12.04.1918_%D0%9E_%D0%BF%D0%B0%D0%BC%D1%8F%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%85_%D0%A0%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BF%D1%83%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B8

range of international and historical revolutionaries, writers and other figures, including Robespierre, Robert Owen, and Herzen. By ordering them to be installed in the streets of Russian cities in commemoration of the Russian Socialist Revolution, Lenin framed the Revolution as an event that had emerged as the next necessary iteration of a cohesive historical tradition. In the unstable conditions of the Civil War, the monuments conferred a much needed sense of historical continuity and legitimacy onto Party rule.

The Futurist doctrine of historical rupture was alien to this objective and perhaps explains why, when reviewing a prototype¹⁶⁴ in the style of Futurist abstraction, Lenin responded with suspicion and outright mockery. After politely deferring to Lunacharsky for his opinion, and hearing that the Commissar had no intent of accepting the prototype, Lenin exclaimed “and I thought you were going to erect some kind of Futurist nonsense!”¹⁶⁵ Later, when Lunacharsky attempted to engage the leader of the Party in a conversation about left art, “Vladimir Ilyich laughed them off, mocked them a bit, but still stated that he was unable to seriously speak on such matters, for he felt himself not competent enough.”¹⁶⁶ While Lenin believed in the necessity of creating new public art to replace the remnants of the tsarist regime, the Futurist style was clearly not what he had in mind.

The Party’s approach to cultural policy shifted significantly as the Civil War drew to a close. Lenin and the leader of the Red Army, Leon Trotsky, shifted their attention from waging war to the economic and cultural reconstruction of Soviet Russia. Lenin acknowledged the

¹⁶⁴ In Lunacharsky’s recollections of Lenin, the sculptor of this monument is not identified. Lunacharsky, “Lenin i iskusstvo. vospominaniya”.

¹⁶⁵ Lunacharsky, “Lenin i iskusstvo”.

¹⁶⁶ Lunacharsky, “Lenin i iskusstva”.

economic failure of War Communism, and, in 1921, transitioned to the more moderate New Economic Policy (NEP). Under NEP, the economy was liberalized and private enterprise was permitted to resume. This form of “state capitalism,” Lenin argued, was “a transitional stage” necessary to prepare “by many years of effort-- for the transition to communism.”¹⁶⁷ As a compliment to this gradual historical development, Lenin outlined a clearly defined policy of “cultural revolution,” in his 1923 article “On Cooperation.” This shift in focus towards a defined cultural policy caused the Party to begin consolidating control of the Soviet cultural administration. The 1920 decree “On the Proletkults”, published by the Central Committee in Pravda, signaled a shift in the hierarchy of control in the Party’s cultural administration, and a consolidation of power in the hands of Lenin and the Central Committee. Lunacharsky’s Narkompros, and Proletkult could no longer function with the level of autonomy they had enjoyed during the Civil War. The combined factors of centralization and the constructive historical model of cultural revolution caused the Futurist’s cultural vanguardism and doctrine of historical rupture to become increasingly untenable in the eyes of the Party.

The 1920 decree “On the Proletkults” represented the first serious intervention by Lenin and the Central Committee in the realm of cultural policy. In it, the Central Committee condemned the widely popular art organization Proletkult, and, by extension, Futurism. While it was published under the general authorship of the Central Committee, Lenin played a significant role in its composition, having finalized it with the input of his wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya.¹⁶⁸ Lenin’s role in the decree signaled a shift in the hierarchy of command in the realm of Soviet

¹⁶⁷ Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 484.

¹⁶⁸ Jangfeldt, *Mayakovskij and Futurism*

cultural affairs. Lunacharsky, who recognized that the decree contained a “significant drop of Lenin himself,” reported that he was not consulted before the decree was published.¹⁶⁹ By circumventing the leader of the Bolshevik cultural administration, Lenin demonstrated that the ultimate authority in matters of culture was Lenin himself.

As discussed above, Lenin had a much narrower taste than the Commissar of Enlightenment and was apt to dismiss the Futurists eccentricities offhand. “His taste,” Lunacharsky later recalled, “was more or less defined. He loved the Russian classics, loved realism in literature and so on.”¹⁷⁰ The Futurist’s rejection of the literary canon as irredeemably bourgeois was alien to Lenin’s Marxist beliefs, and his rather traditional taste in literature. The proletarian revolution, after all, emerged directly from the cultural and economic advances of the bourgeoisies. In this regard, the contents of “On the Proletkults” reflected Lenin’s dismissive attitude towards the Futurists. While they were only mentioned peripherally, the Futurists faced the damning condemnation by Lenin and the Central Committee for their corruptive influence on the workers; “in the realm of art, the workers have been instilled with absurd, perverse tastes (futurism).”¹⁷¹ As Lenin turned his attention to cultural policy, Lunacharsky could no longer shelter the Futurists from the vitriol of the Party’s leader.

Lenin’s bid towards centralization in culture was most apparent in the condemnation of Proletkult in “On the Proletkults”. At the time, Proletkult functioned as a separate entity from the Bolshevik party, with a high membership rate that rivaled that of the Party. “At its peak in 1920,

¹⁶⁹ Lunacharsky, “Lenin i iskusstva”.

¹⁷⁰ Lunacharsky, “Lenin i iskusstva”.

¹⁷¹ Central Committee, “O Proletkultax”.

Proletkult had 84,000 members actively enrolled in about 300 local studios, clubs, and factory groups, with an additional 500,000 members participating in its activities on a more casual basis.¹⁷² Proletkult's widespread popularity, and its autonomy from Narkompros, was unacceptable to Lenin. According to the 1920 decree, Proletkult was "a petty-bourgeois attempt to establish an institutional base outside of Soviet power."¹⁷³ The organization's widespread popularity was a threat to the Party's ideological unity, a concept detailed by Lenin two months later in his 1921 speech to the 10th Party Congress. In the face of foreign threats, and the task of constructing Soviet socialism, he warned "discussion means disputes; disputes mean discord; discord means that the Communists have become weak."¹⁷⁴ The publication of "On Proletkult" signaled to artists, poets and critics, including the Futurists, that the Party had the ultimate say in matters of cultural policy. Lunacharsky's Narkompros, and Proletkult could no longer function with the level of autonomy they had enjoyed during the Civil War.

In light of this, the Futurists could no longer depend wholly on Lunacharsky's tolerance and support. Their attempt to form a Communist cultural ideology independently of the Party in *Art of the Commune*, and later, as part of the organization Kom-Fut, was anathema to Lenin's policy of Party unity, while their best efforts to influence the workers were received by Soviet Russia's highest authority as "absurd and perverse tastes."¹⁷⁵ The Left Front of Arts theoretical

¹⁷² Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proletkult>

¹⁷³ Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 203

¹⁷⁴ Vladimir Lenin, "Speech At The Opening Of The Congress, March 8," trans. Yuri Sdobnikov, 1921, in *Lenin's Collected Works* (Moscow, 32: Progress Publishers, 1965), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/10thcong/ch01.htm>.

¹⁷⁵ C.C., "O Proletkultax"

precept of “social demand” and the apologetic tone struck by Mayakovsky and Brik’s proposal for LEF journal were responses to this increased scrutiny from the Party. Kruchenykh and other Futurist poets’ attempt to present themselves as poetic specialists, rather than as the vanguard-poets of Mayakovsky’s “Order of the Day to the Army of the Arts,” also reflected the shift in the hierarchy of the Soviet Cultural administration. It was no longer tenable for the Futurist poets to claim the status of cultural vanguard. By adopting the role of specialists, they positioned themselves as a productive cell within the broader system of Soviet culture.

After the Civil War, the Bolsheviks faced the task of constructing a socialist society in the wreckage of an economy that had been devastated by the Civil War and was severely crippled by international sanctions. In response, Lenin advanced a notion of culture as a means for increasing economic productivity and solidarity among the workers and peasants. In the article “On Cooperation” published in 1923, he argued that the two main tasks faced by the Party were economic and cultural construction. In order to develop Soviet Russia’s economy, Lenin argued, the peasants needed to be organized into work co-operatives. This could only be achieved once the peasants were literate, cultured, and aware of their place within the new socialist society. In light of this, “the objective of cultural work,” was to make the Soviet people “so ‘enlightened’ that they understand all the advantages of everybody participating in the work of the cooperatives, and organizes participation.”¹⁷⁶ In other words, “cultural work” was for Lenin a means of mobilizing the masses and legitimizing Bolshevik rule of socialist society. “This

¹⁷⁶ Vladimir Lenin, “On Cooperation,” in *Lenin's Collected Works*, 2nd english edition ed. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 33; previously published in *Pravda* (Moscow), 1923, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1923/jan/06.htm>.

cultural revolution would now suffice to make our country a completely socialist country.”¹⁷⁷

Now that their hold on political power was clear, the party saw culture in increasingly instrumental terms, as a means of increasing economic productivity and the resilience of Soviet Russia against foreign adversaries.

The same instrumental notion of culture was expressed by the leader of the Red Army, Leon Trotsky, in his 1923 article, “Not by Politics Alone.” He explained, “we must learn to work efficiently, accurately, punctually, economically... The working class must undergo a long process of self-education, and so must the peasantry, either along with the workers, or following them.”¹⁷⁸ This “long process of self-education” would allow peasants and workers to develop “the most elementary habits and notions of culture” conducive to productive labor, such as “tidiness, instruction,” and “punctuality.”¹⁷⁹ The Cultural Revolution was a stage that needed to be passed through in order to achieve socialism.

While his conservative taste certainly played a role in his negative reception of Mayakovsky’s *150,000,000*, Lenin’s response was also shaped by his rather narrow and instrumentalizing notion of culture and cultural revolution. His evaluation of *150,000,000* as “Nonsense, stupid, superficial stupidity and tendentiousness!”¹⁸⁰ was consistent with his mocking attitude of the Futurists in his conversations with Lunacharsky, and his unwillingness to engage in “dilettantism.” However, the next line of his note revealed the pragmatism underlying

¹⁷⁷ Lenin, “On Cooperation”.

¹⁷⁸ Leon Trotsky, “Not by Politics Alone,” *Problems of Everyday Life and Other Writings on Culture and Science* (New York, NY: Monad Press, 1973), 16.

¹⁷⁹ Leon Trotsky, “Not by Politics Alone,” 20.

¹⁸⁰ Lenin, “On Cooperation”.

his reception of Mayakovsky's poem. "In my opinion, print such things only 1 out of 10 and no more than 1,500 copies for libraries and cranks."¹⁸¹ While Mayakovsky had intended for his poem to speak from the point of view of the masses *to* the masses, in his note, Lenin demoted its appeal to an extremely narrow sector of the population-- 1,500 cranks. If the cultural objective of the Party was to educate as large a portion of the population as quickly as possible, then the Futurist poets' attempt to establish themselves as communist poets was cut short by the simple fact that their poetry was, in Lenin's opinion, idiosyncratic, difficult to read, and as a result, limited in its mass appeal. After all, when pursuing the objective of cultural revolution, Lenin wrote, "our rule must be: as little philosophizing and as few acrobatics as possible."¹⁸² Furthermore, Lenin's concern with limiting the printing of Mayakovsky's poem revealed the party leaders thoroughly economistic attitude towards cultural production. If a poem lacked mass appeal, and could not therefore effectively contribute to the policy objectives of cultural revolution, then it should not occupy the limited resources of the Soviet cultural apparatus.

Leon Trotsky had a similar, if not significantly more nuanced critique of Futurist poetry. In terms of their taste in art and literature, Lenin and Trotsky were, in historian Joshua Rubenstein's words, "almost complete opposites."¹⁸³ While Lenin had "a distinct puritanical streak," and "lived simply, read only books that contributed to his work, and did his best to avoid sentimental pleasures," Trotsky "enjoyed art and music, read widely in several languages, raised

¹⁸¹ Quotes in Jangfeldt, *Mayakovskij and Futurism*, 106.

¹⁸² Lenin, "On Cooperation."

¹⁸³ Joshua Rubenstein, *Leon Trotsky: A Revolutionary's Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 86, JSTOR.

children with his second wife, and adored hunting and fishing.”¹⁸⁴ He wrote extensively on literature, theater, poetry, art, and film, and penned a series of essays on cultural policy that were published in Pravda between 1922 and 1927 under the title *Problems of Everyday Life*. Trotsky’s chapter on Futurism in his book *Literature and Revolution*, provides valuable insight into how the Party evaluated Futurism and Futurist poetry in the context of the NEP period.

Futurist poetry was of some potential value in the broader project of economic and cultural reconstruction. Futurist theory on the “conscious influence upon the development of language and systematic formation of word” was “extremely significant and interesting from the point of view of building a Socialist culture.”¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, Trotsky was well aware of the importance of Futurist poetry, and their significant contribution to the Russian language and Russian culture. He acknowledged “Mayakovsky’s influence on a whole series of proletarian poets.”¹⁸⁶ He even echoed the Futurist notion of word renewal; “we must realize that Futurism has pushed out of poetry many worn words and phrases, and has made them full-blooded again and, in a few cases, has happily created new words and phrases which have entered, or are entering, into the vocabulary of poetry and which can enrich the living language.”¹⁸⁷ Unlike Lenin, Trotsky was clearly interested in Futurism as a cultural phenomenon, and was open to the efforts of the Futurist poets to present themselves as servants of the revolution.

¹⁸⁴ Rubenstein, 86.

¹⁸⁵ Leon Trotsky, “Futurism,” in *Literature and Revolution* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1957), Accessed April 25, 2020, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/, pdf.

¹⁸⁶ Trotsky, “Futurism”.

¹⁸⁷ Trotsky, “Futurism”.

Yet for Trotsky, the Futurists' status as revolutionaries was compromised by their class-origins among the bohemian intelligentsia, and their inability to fully root themselves in the Marxist doctrine of history. Trotsky argued that Futurism emerged from a bourgeois cycle of rupture and reassimilation. As established artforms lost their relevance in the face of novel historical circumstances, "the literary bohemia, the youth who are of military age" were aroused, "cursing the satiated and vulgar bourgeois culture, secretly dream of a few little balls for themselves, and gilded ones, too, if possible."¹⁸⁸ The Futurists were precisely this kind of "literary bohemia." The only difference was that the revolution had "caught Futurism still in the stages of being a persecuted group."¹⁸⁹ Because of their class origins, the Futurists remained bohemians at heart, still attached to their "childish habits," "yellow blouses," and "excessive excitement."¹⁹⁰ In distinction, the Bolsheviks, who had also emerged from the intelligentsia, rooted their doctrine in the "objective knowledge of Marxism."¹⁹¹ The failure of Futurism to "feel itself a part of the revolutionary tradition" was the cause of "the incompatibility of psychologic type between the Communist, who is a political revolutionist, and the Futurist, who is a revolutionary innovator of form."¹⁹² Like Lenin and Plekhanov, Trotsky based the legitimacy of the Bolsheviks as revolutionaries in the "objective knowledge of Marxism." Because the Futurists insisted on "childish habits," and rejected the past outright, they had no grasp on the

¹⁸⁸ Trotsky, "Futurism".

¹⁸⁹ Trotsky, "Futurism".

¹⁹⁰ Trotsky, "Futurism".

¹⁹¹ Trotsky, "Futurism".

¹⁹² Trotsky, "Futurism".

objective laws of history and were as a result unable to effectively lead the proletariat through the necessary stages of revolution.

The Futurist doctrine of historical rupture was especially hard to justify in light of Lenin and Trotsky's policy of cultural revolution. Trotsky rightly pointed out that the Futurist revolt against the past emerged from within the specific discourse and cultural knowledge of the intelligentsia. "The Futurist break with the past is a tempest which grew up in the closed-in world of the intelligentsia which grew up on Pushkin, Fet, Tyutchev, Briusov, Balmont, and Blok".¹⁹³ What the Futurists failed to recognize was that the working-class "does not have to, and cannot break with literary tradition, because the working-class is not in the grip of such tradition."¹⁹⁴ In the context of the Party's policy of cultural revolution, the insistence that the literary canon be jettisoned would have appeared premature and conspicuously out of step. Trotsky understood that the Futurist's rejection of the literary canon would be an ineffective means of carrying out the mass cultural revolution as called for and defined by Lenin. For, as Trotsky pointed out, "the working-class does not know the old literature, it still has to commune with it, it still has to master Pushkin, to absorb him, and so overcome him."¹⁹⁵ The working class and peasantry had yet to be transformed into a unified work collective through the "long process of self-education."¹⁹⁶ After all, Trotsky stressed that the cultural struggle could not "be done all at once by some miraculous means."¹⁹⁷ The Futurists, limited as they were by their childish

¹⁹³ Trotsky, "Futurism".

¹⁹⁴ Trotsky, "Futurism".

¹⁹⁵ Trotsky, "Futurism".

¹⁹⁶ Trotsky, "Not by Politics Alone," 16.

¹⁹⁷ Trotsky, "Not by Politics Alone," 18.

habits, had failed to see the Revolution according to the Marxist model of historical development. One could not simply reject the past, leap into the future, and expect lasting results.

The attempt by the Left Front of Arts to define the art, literature, and theatre of the new socialist society was similarly out of line with the Party's model of historical development. Because their theory did not directly contribute to the project of mass-enlightenment, their attempt to position themselves as communist artists was met with the skepticism, if not outright derision, of the Party. "Even when they mark out correctly the general trend of development in the field of art or life," Trotsky wrote, "the theorists of "Lef" anticipate history and contrast their scheme or their prescription with that which is. They thus have no bridge to the future."¹⁹⁸ The LEF theorists put forth theoretical models, such as Mayakovsky's attempts to reduce verse composition to mathematical formulas or Meyerhold's theory of biomechanics, that prematurely anticipated the future. "To tear out of the future that which can only develop as an inseparable part of it," Trotsky continued "and to hurriedly materialize this partial anticipation in the present day dearth and before the cold footlights, is only to make an impression of provincial dilettantism."¹⁹⁹ The LEF theorists proposed models of art that simply could not yet be realized in the "present day dearth," by which Trotsky likely referred to the compromised Soviet economy and high rates of illiteracy among the workers and peasants. In rejecting the past and attempting to create the art and poetry of the future, the Futurists overstepped the necessity of cultural revolution. Thus, despite their best efforts to present themselves as communist artists,

¹⁹⁸ Trotsky, "Futurism".

¹⁹⁹ Trotsky, "Futurism".

the actual utility of LEF's contribution to the revolution was left unclear, making it impossible for them to attain their desired level of cultural hegemony.

The value of Kruchenykh and the Futurist poets' attempt to engineer the language of the future was also unclear. Trotsky dismissed Futurist sound poetry outright. Kruchenykh's claim that "dyr bir schyl" "contained more poetry than all of Pushkin" was, he wrote, "something midway between philologic poetics, and the insolence of bad manners."²⁰⁰ Lunacharsky, in "Open Letter to Aseev" (1923), was similarly dismissive of *zaum*, which he placed alongside non-objectivity in art as one of "the most extreme manifestations of the intellectual and emotional emptiness of the bourgeoisie and all of Europe, Russia included."²⁰¹ Trotsky did, however, express serious interest in the Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov's word-creation. "Khlebnikov or Kruchenykh's making ten or one hundred new derivative words out of existing roots may... facilitate the development of the living and even of the poetic language, and forecast a time when the evolution of speech will be more consciously directed."²⁰² Yet he doubted the ability of these neologisms to enter everyday speech as Kruchenykh, Vinokur and Arvatov had hoped, writing "it is absolutely unquestionable that language lives and develops, creating new words from within, and discarding antiquated ones. But a language does this extremely cautiously and calculatingly, and according to the strictest need."²⁰³ Futurist language engineering was ultimately premature in the Party's schema of historical development. More

²⁰⁰ Trotsky, "Futurism".

²⁰¹ Anatoly Lunacharsky, "Kak nehorosho vyhodit! Vrode otkrytovo pic'ma tov. Aseeva" [How Bad it Is! An Open Letter to Comrade Aseev], *Pravda* (Moscow, USSR), December 7, 1923, accessed October 5, 2020, <http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-2/kak-nehoroso-vyhodit/#fn:2>.

²⁰² Trotsky, "Futurism".

²⁰³ Trotsky, "Futurism".

pressing matters, such as the cultural revolution and the mass education of the peasants, rendered the experimental activities of the Futurist poets premature.

Kruchenykh's attempt to position futurist poets as specialists in the creation of agitational-propaganda, and the LEF theorists' theoretical speculations on the role of Futurist poets as linguistic engineers were also ineffective. While for pragmatic tasks such as creating "the best kinds of machine guns," the party "assigns certain Party workers to the task of considering and mastering these problems,"²⁰⁴ the development of art, Trotsky argued, was "not part of the Party's tasks, nor is it its concern. The Party does not delegate anyone for such work."²⁰⁵ Whether this dismissal of art specialists extended to Kruchenykh's task, "Experiment with the use of jargon phonetics to give form to antireligious and political themes," and his experimental study of LEF agitational poetry is left unsaid.

The Futurist's emphasis on form over content represented another irreconcilable tension between Marxism and Futurist theories of revolution. Trotsky was critical of Mayakovsky's *150,000,000* because of its lack of grounding in historical fact, and tendency towards formal flights of fancy. In the poem, Trotsky wrote, "the poet is too much in evidence. He allows too little independence to events and facts, so that it is not the Revolution that is struggling with obstacles, but it is Mayakovsky who does athletic stunts in the arena of words."²⁰⁶ Mayakovsky revealed his highly individualistic style in fantastic images and formal choices that failed to represent the objective reality of events and facts. Trotsky singled out the phrases, "Wilson

²⁰⁴ Trotsky, "Futurism".

²⁰⁵ Trotsky, "Futurism".

²⁰⁶ Trotsky, "Futurism".

swimming in fat” and “Wilson gobbles, grows fat, his bellies grow story on story.” “The worker,” he continued, “at least the worker who will read Mayakovsky’s poem, has seen Wilson’s photograph. Wilson is thin, though we may readily believe that he swallows a sufficient quantity of proteins and fats.”²⁰⁷ Such inventive imagery represented the “purposeless arbitrariness of art.”²⁰⁸ Mayakovsky’s emphasis on revolutionizing the formal quality of language over its objective content had little to do with the Bolshevik notion of revolution, rooted as it was in socio-historical analysis.

Trotsky was correct in pointing out that the Futurists’ origins among the bohemian intelligentsia had caused them to develop a set of practices that were alien to the Party’s Marxist-Leninist ideology. Mayakovsky’s “revolution of form” and Kruchenykh’s transrational poetry emerged from the debates and theoretical discourse of the Russian avant-garde, rather than from the tradition of Russian Marxism. After 1917, the Futurists occupied the precarious position of justifying their program of formal revolution to a revolutionary organization with whom they had little in common. They relied heavily on the tolerance of Party leaders like Lunacharsky to continue advancing their aesthetic platform, while remaining vulnerable to shifts in the Party’s cultural policy, and public condemnations such as “On the Proletkults”. Furthermore, the reception of Futurism by Party leaders Lunacharsky, Lenin and Trotsky was informed by a set of theoretical presuppositions that caused them to dismiss many of the Futurists most provocative claims offhand. The most difficult claim for the Futurists to justify to the Party was their doctrine of historical rupture, which continued to prevent their full alignment with the Bolsheviks. The

²⁰⁷ Trotsky, “Futurism”.

²⁰⁸ Trotsky, “Futurism”.

Futurist poets had shifted their rhetoric to meet the ideological demands of the Party, and conceded their status as poet-vanguards to the role of poet-specialists. Yet in order for Futurist poets like Mayakovsky and Kruchenykh to become true revolutionaries in the eyes of the Party, they would have needed to cease being Futurists altogether. Indeed, as the 1920's drew to a close and the Party became less tolerant of ideological deviance, the Futurists began to fade out of existence altogether.

Conclusion

Poetry feeds and waters the passions and desires; she lets them rule instead of ruling them...we shall continue to prohibit all poetry which goes beyond hymns to the Gods and praises of famous men. Not pleasure and pain, but law and reason shall rule in our State.

-Plato, Book II, *The Republic*

The poet's proper role in relation to the State has been a subject of debate since Plato rejected the poet as a pedagogue in *The Republic* in favor of philosopher kings whose knowledge of ideal forms would ensure the proper governance of the Republic. Plekhanov, Lenin and the Bolshevik party, in their claim on the "objective knowledge of Marxism," resembled the philosopher of Plato's Allegory of the Cave in book VII of *The Republic*, in which the prisoner leaves the illusory world of the cave to the realm of ideal Forms, only to return and impart his knowledge on his fellow prisoners. The Bolsheviks' knowledge of hidden historical forces,

gained through the theory of dialectical-materialism, was the source of their sense of political legitimacy and revolutionary purpose. The Futurist poets, however, had failed to recognize these historical forces, and were as a result condemned, in the eyes of the Party, to the shadows of “childish habits” and empty bohemian formalism. Because of its emphasis on formal device over fact, Mayakovsky’s *150,000,000* had little to do with the objective world as Trotsky understood it, and was therefore in danger of misleading the Russian workers and peasants whom the Bolsheviks aimed to enlighten. Kruchenykh’s transrational language had even less to do with the Bolsheviks’ political platform, in its absolute emphasis on the individual expressiveness of the poet over the representation of objective reality. Thus, despite Mayakovsky and Kruchenykh’s best efforts to prove otherwise, their Futurist poetics had no role to play in the construction of the Soviet state. Their poetry, insofar as its emphasis on formal revolution was concerned, was decidedly not political.

Nevertheless, while the Futurists’ failure to establish formal experimentation as a means of liberating human creativity was rooted in this lukewarm reception by the party, they continued to advance their aesthetic platform, adapting to the historical and ideological exigencies of their moment. Mayakovsky was perhaps the most authentic supporter of the Bolsheviks among the Futurists, having joined the Party briefly as an adolescent and declaring in 1908 his desire to create a “socialist art.” When Mayakovsky accepted the 1917 October Revolution as “My Revolution,” he was no doubt acting out of a genuine commitment to socialism, and a sincere belief that Futurism was compatible with, and even complimentary to, Bolshevism. However, in opposing the Futurist “revolution of form” to the socialist revolution of content, Mayakovsky positioned Futurism at the level of the Party.

In the first years after the Revolution, Mayakovsky and the Futurists of *The Futurist Gazette* and *Art of the Commune*, aimed to establish themselves as a cultural vanguard, which would act parallel to the party, determining the trajectory of socialist art and poetry. Towards these ends, Mayakovsky and his fellow Futurist poets imagined themselves as a sort of poetic vanguard, leading the masses in a distinctly Futurist march that would sustain and transform the enthusiasm that had accompanied the February and October revolutions. Yet Mayakovsky and the Futurists of *The Futurist Gazette* and *The Art of the Commune* were in no position to realize their conception of cultural revolution. Instead, as pressure from the Party and rival art organizations increased, Mayakovsky was forced to adapt the role of the poet as vanguard into a poet-specialist in service of the Revolution.

Kruchenykh, on the other hand, was not predisposed towards political revolutionism. His most revolutionary theoretical innovation, his conception of *zaum*, was rooted in the individual expressiveness of the poet and the subjective experience of the reader or listener, rather than the transformation of society as a whole. As a result, Kruchenykh exemplified, much more so than Mayakovsky's, the Futurists' adaptation to the Party's political demands as a means of self-preservation. When Kruchenykh joined the Left Front of the Arts in 1923, he quickly took on the mantle of poet-specialist, producing a number of theoretical texts defending the value of Futurist poetics in agitational propaganda and political rhetoric. In *Lef Agitation*, Kruchenykh shifted his understanding of Futurist poetics, such as its emphasis on sound, rhythm and formal renewal, as producing indeterminate meaning, to Futurist poetics deployed with the objective of giving as impressive a presentation as possible to determinate ideological content. In *Devices of Lenin's* speech, Kruchenykh defended the Futurist emphasis on formal renewal by portraying Lenin as a

skilled, semi-Futurist rhetorician. While this may appear as pandering to the Party for support, Kruchenykh was nonetheless able to preserve a large part of the Futurist poetic platform, including its emphasis on sound, rhythm, texture and formal experimentation.

The Party's reception of Futurism and Futurist poetics played a key role in determining the fate of post revolutionary Futurism. Whereas before the revolution, the Futurists were able to rely on wealthy donors for material and financial support, after 1917, they became entirely reliant on the Bolshevik party. The Bolsheviks had an entirely different understanding of Revolution, based in the dialectical materialism of the Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov, that determined their criticism of Futurism. At the same time, the Party's cultural policy shifted rapidly according to historical exigencies such as the Civil War and the New Economic Policy, and changes in power relations within the Party itself. During the Civil War, the Futurists' ability to argue for their status as cultural vanguard was enabled by the tolerant cultural policy of Anatoly Lunacharsky, who saw the Futurists as a means of legitimizing his cultural administration Narkompros. Lunacharsky was critical of the Futurists, in part due to pressure from Lenin and his own Marxist background, especially for what he saw as the Futurist's fallacious rejection of the past. As the Civil War drew to its close and Party leaders like Lenin and Trotsky shifted their attention to cultural matters, the Futurists needed to quickly adapt to the new policy of cultural revolution. The thread which linked the Party's evolving attitude towards the Futurists was the foreignness of the Futurists' rejection of the past to the Marxist understanding of historical development. The Futurists were ultimately alien to Marxist revolution, and as a result could not achieve legitimacy as revolutionary poets and artists.

Whether or not the Futurists' theoretical platform can be reduced to childish habits and empty bohemianism is, however, an open question. While it was arguably confined to the realm of aesthetics, Mayakovsky's "Revolution of the Spirit" contained notions of collectivity and historical transformation that may have acted as a compliment or even alternative to political revolution. The poet, for Mayakovsky, forced his reader to dwell in the world-shattering experience of the Revolution, and maintained it as a space of possibility and change. Rather than immediately solidifying its legacy as Lenin did in his Plan of "Monumental Propaganda," Mayakovsky saw Revolution as an open ended process, much in the same way that Futurist poetics emphasized the continual renewal of experience through formal rupture. Considering the bureaucratization of the Party and the dogmatization of its ideology, perhaps creating a space for a poet such as Mayakovsky would have allowed for a different understanding of the revolution that left more room for innovation and change.

Kruchenykh's works on agitational propaganda also raised a number of compelling questions. By pointing out that the reception of Bolshevik ideology was dependent on its formal and aesthetic framing, both in terms of its presentation in agitational propaganda and political rhetoric, Kruchenykh blurred the line between aesthetics and politics. To what extent was the Bolsheviks' mass mobilization of the peasants and workers through agitational propaganda, and the creation of the new Soviet ethos, an aesthetic project? How much are our own political beliefs shaped by their formal presentation? Kruchenykh, in his careful analysis of slogans and advertisements, may have been an effective advertiser for a modern day political campaign, coining familiar slogans like "Yes We Can," "Love Trumps Hate," or "Make America Great." It may have even been interesting to see the original *zaum* poet do an analysis of Donald Trump's

zaum-like presidential tweets. Transrational language itself, despite its unanimous rejection by Party leaders, with its emphasis on indeterminate meaning, held open language as a space of possibility and creative transformation, and may have had something to contribute to the development of revolutionary art.

Yet there was no clear place for Futurism in the Soviet Union. As the 1920's drew to a close, the Futurists faced pressure to conform to an increasingly strict set of artistic criteria. In 1927, the Party's notion of "cultural revolution" took on a new form, defined by Sheila Fitzpatrick in *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*, as "a political confrontation of 'proletarian' Communists and the 'bourgeois' intelligentsia, in which the Communists sought to overthrow the cultural authorities inherited from the old regime. The aim of the Cultural Revolution was to create a new 'proletarian intelligentsia.' Its method was class war."²⁰⁹ The supporters of the Cultural Revolution were critical of Lunacharsky and Narkompros for their tolerance of bourgeois elements that were "struggling to increase their own share, fighting for their own school, their own art, their own theatre and film, trying to use the state apparatus for that purpose."²¹⁰ The Futurists were precisely these kinds of bourgeois elements. After Lunacharsky stepped down in 1929, they could no longer continue advancing their aesthetic platform for fear of political persecution. Kruchenykh wrote a number of anti-kulak propaganda plays, including *Darkness* (1927) and *Hooligans in the Village* (1927), that bore little to no resemblance to his early Futurist works. Instead, crude Soviet archetypes, a komsomol

²⁰⁹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Cultural Revolution as Class War," in *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (n.p.: Cornell University Press, 1992), 115, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv3s8p7n.12>.

²¹⁰ Fitzpatrick, "Cultural Revolution," 117.

youth, a rich kulak, a manipulative priest and naive drunken peasants, among others, are played off of each other in a lifeless and rather mechanical narrative, with strikingly brutal anti-kulak imagery. In one of the plays, the daughter of a wealthy Kulak is left in the oven to die after having a child with a local Komsomol member.²¹¹ Kruchenykh was clearly attempting to adapt to the ideological demands of his moment, and perhaps his willingness to adapt explains why he survived the 1930's and died of old age in Moscow. Mayakovsky, on the other hand, was more sensitive to the changes that had taken place than Kruchenykh. In 1930, Mayakovsky committed suicide. "The revolution of form" in early Soviet Russia came to an end.

²¹¹ See Alexei Kruchenykh and N. Romanovskii, *T'ma* (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1927), <https://ruslit.traumlibrary.net/fx/kruchenih-romanovskiy-tyma.html>.

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